Education and Opportunity

Attempts at Equality and Equity in Education

Why is there inequality in the educational system and what can we do about it? As suggested by this book’s introduction and the readings in Chapter 7, the U.S. education system is rife with problems of inequality. Many programs to bring about change have been designed to remedy these inequalities. This chapter contains descriptions of some of these efforts, most of which are current issues in education today. Although we cannot cover all attempts at equality and equity, we focus on those most salient, both from this historical record and at the present time. We do not cover general educational reforms in this part of the book, but leave the discussion of those efforts to Chapter 11 and other chapters.

In studying broad changes in education of any kind, we notice that the impetus for these changes comes from many different directions, with the most far-reaching changes generated at the federal level, either through judicial decisions or via massive funding efforts. This should not be surprising, given the preceding readings about the organization of schools in the United States (Chapter 4) and the way schools are financed (Reyes and Rodriguez, Chapter 3). In fact, loose coupling combined with local financing of schools makes broad-based reform efforts very difficult in the United States, as the readings in this chapter suggest.

School systems across the United States and other countries are very difficult organizations in which to introduce change, as illustrated by the many stakeholders in the open systems model. One of the most significant pieces of legislation to impact schools was targeted directly at increasing equality in education—Brown v. Board of Education. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision of Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas ruled that separate but equal education was unconstitutional. This decision set in motion many changes in public school education today and is thought to be responsible for changing the composition of cities and their schools as whites fled urban areas to avoid sending their children to desegregated schools. In 1964, James Coleman was commissioned by the U.S. Congress to assess changes in schools 10 years after this ruling. Coleman found that the 1954 decision had little impact on the segregation of America’s schools. Pressure began to mount as school districts were “encouraged” to desegregate. These changes sometimes meant closing all-black schools and moving those students into formerly all-white schools (Cecelski, 1994). White residents also worked to alter the shape and structure of school districts during this period in an attempt to keep from desegregating their children (Rubin, 1972).
The early 1970s were active times, with courts mandating school desegregation across the country in a climate of outright racial conflict, particularly in the South. Both policies of desegregation and affirmative action are currently being challenged and overturned in the courts. Focus on minority status and social class is important because poverty is not distributed evenly across racial and ethnic households. In 2008, far more black (24.7%), and Hispanic (23.2%) households with children under the age of 18 live below the poverty level than white (8.6%) or Asian and Pacific Islander (11.8%) households (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Issues of segregation, desegregation, and resegregation are addressed in the first two readings in this chapter. The first reading by Gary Orfield discusses the legal history of school desegregation and the current state of “resegregation” in American schools. The second reading by Jennifer Jellison Holme, Amy Stuart Wells, and Anita Tijerina Revilla use interviews with individuals who graduated in 1980 and were forced to attend desegregated schools in the early years of the implementation of the desegregation legislation to better understand the short-term and long-term impacts of these changes. Two more recent attempts by the federal government to achieve equality in education, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top, were discussed in Chapter 3’s reading by Kathryn Borman and Bridget Cotner. These two pieces of legislation designed to improve schools focused on increasing educational opportunities and experiences for all children. Borman and Cotner discussed a series of federal reform efforts that culminated in 2002 in the NCLB legislation and, in 2010, President Obama’s Blueprint for Reform, both of which focus on accountability and innovation. One reform effort that is gaining momentum as a result of NCLB and the Blueprint for Reform is the charter school movement. Both pieces of legislation saw charter schools as an opportunity to provide alternative educational opportunities in public school systems and put more pressure on existing schools to improve the educational experiences they provide. Charter schools share many similarities with the earlier magnet schools; however, charter schools operate outside of most regulation by federal, state, and local authorities. The reading in this chapter by Linda Renzulli and Vincent Roscigno describes the rise of charter schools in the United States and considers the future of this recent school movement. The following reading by Linda Darling-Hammond uses her experience and background in researching school reform efforts to consider how charter schools, and all schools, can be more successful in educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although only briefly discussed in readings in this chapter, magnet schools, the precursors to charter schools, were one way that school districts attempted to desegregate without busing students involuntarily from one school to another. Magnet schools were organized in districts to attract students from different backgrounds around particular subject areas such as math and science or the arts. Successful magnet schools should have desegregated school districts; however, this was not always the case. In many cases, magnet schools enrolled only white students because those students had the cultural resources to both learn about and qualify for admittance to these specialized schools. Furthermore, teachers in magnet schools were trained in the particular area of the magnet, not necessarily in working with children from diverse racial backgrounds, as would be the case in desegregated schools (Metz, 1994).

A little background may be useful to understand the controversy surrounding the idea of parents choosing schools for their children. School choice became a political issue in the 1970s. At that time Americans were concerned about desegregation and the quality of education their children were receiving. Choice was seen as a way of improving education without increasing costs and getting parents more involved in the education of their children. Models of school choice, however, varied considerably; some were statewide, some only involved districts, while others included private schools. Whereas some people argue that school choice gives lower-class families an opportunity to get their children out of inferior educational settings and send them to better schools, others believe that lower-class parents will not have the “cultural capital” necessary to find their way through the
system to the best schools (see the Johnson reading in Chapter 7; Saporito & Lareau, 1999) or to broker the best education for their children, as described by Lareau and Horvat in Chapter 2. Unfortunately, the first criterion in making a school choice for the white parents is the racial composition of the school their children will attend (Saporito & Lareau, 1999). The result of such choices reinforces the resegregation of schools, as illustrated in the reading by Holme, Wells, and Revilla in this chapter. It is unfortunate, but they found that both white and black students who benefited from desegregation still wanted their own children to attend “good schools” or predominantly white schools.

Attempts to achieve equality and equity in education face an uphill battle. The problems faced by schools are considerable and setting standards alone does not make up for inequality in society. As Richard Rothstein describes in his reading in this chapter, the achievement gap is rooted as much in the effects of poverty on children’s lives as it is in the structure of our schools. He argues that children from poverty backgrounds have a considerable disadvantage in schools, regardless of what a school has to offer. As a result, he believes that reform efforts must go beyond the schools to address issues of poverty in general.

You will soon see that changing schools to make them more equal is clearly political. We include a selection by Michael W. Apple to explicitly discuss the politics of school reform. In the last reading in this chapter, Apple considers the conservative strategy toward education and suggests that liberals must think more politically if they are to effect change in schools.

All of these efforts to achieve equity and equality are very different; none are without controversy, but some are more controversial than others. It could be argued that none have been entirely successful because the condition of education for poor and minority children has not improved significantly. The readings in this chapter point to the problems of achieving equality, especially when doing so can affect the privilege of those who benefit from the unequal conditions.

REFERENCES


Lessons Forgotten

Gary Orfield

Gary Orfield is a leading scholar on issues of civil rights and racial segregation in U.S. schools. He is currently codirector of the Civil Rights Project/El Proyecto de CRP, a center that was originally at Harvard University and renamed when it moved to UCLA in 2007. In this reading, Orfield describes the history of school desegregation in the United States. In addition to the legislation, critical to the desegregation and subsequent resegregation of American schools, he also describes the political climate and factors that influenced the attempts to provide more equal educational opportunities across race. Based on his research on school segregation and desegregation over time, this analysis and his other work suggest little hope that the current state of segregation in American schools will be reduced in the future.

Questions to consider for this reading:

1. According to Orfield, how did court cases fall short in ensuring desegregation of American schools?
2. What societal responses to the 1970s legislation made the resegregation of America’s schools inevitable?
3. What difference does it make if schools are segregated?

In an era of great hope for this country’s racial transformation from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, we committed ourselves to creating integrated schools. There was a brief period in our history in which there was serious policy and research attention on how to devise racially diverse schools to achieve integration and equal opportunity. Civil rights leaders and participants in the hundreds of demonstrations demanding integrated education knew the sorry history of “separate but equal” and fought for access to the opportunities concentrated in White schools.

The desegregation experience has often been described by critics as little more than a mechanistic transfer of students, but it was often much more than that. From thousands of desegregation plans implemented around the nation we learned about the ways to operate successful integrated schools and classrooms. Now, as we deal both with resegregation, where court orders are dropped, and with the emergence of racial diversity in thousands of other schools, not as the result of court orders, but as the product of a great increase in the non-White population and of diversification of growing sectors of suburbia,
that experience and the unfinished agenda of the civil rights era are relevant again. Too many hard-earned lessons have been forgotten.

Most of the public struggle for desegregation involved opening the doors of White schools to students who had been historically excluded—Black and, in some cases, Latino students who attended segregated schools that were commonly inferior on many dimensions.¹ There was a fierce, two-decade struggle after Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka to desegregate the South, followed, in the 1970s, by a brief and usually losing struggle to desegregate northern cities. The Supreme Court’s 1974 decision in the metropolitan Detroit case of Milliken v. Bradley rejected the only remedy that could have produced substantial and lasting school desegregation in much of the North, and instead built a massive legal barrier between city school districts and the surrounding suburban districts, where most White children resided and where typically the best schools were located. President Richard Nixon, who ran on the “southern strategy” promising to roll back desegregation, had dismantled much of the civil rights machinery of the federal government by this time (Panetta & Gall, 1971).

Critics often describe this period as one of mandatory race mixing with no educational components. Many educational experts, civil rights advocates, and officials, however, understood early that more must be done. Simply letting some minority’ students into previously White schools operated by the same district officials was not likely to solve the problems of inequality. In fact, these officials often found new ways to discriminate within schools.

The deeper changes, in educational and social terms, involved going from the reality of desegregation—the fact that children of different racial and ethnic groups were now in the same school and faculties had been ordered to be desegregated—toward real integration, which required fair and equal treatment of each racial and ethnic group. Gordon Allport’s classic book, The Nature of Prejudice (1954), published the year of the Brown decision, had concluded that creating desegregated settings could produce either positive or negative outcomes, which depended on how desegregation was done. The key, he said, was creating “equal status interaction” between the previously segregated groups. Allport wrote: “It required years of labor and billions of dollars to gain the secret of the atom. It will take a still greater investment to gain the secrets of man’s irrational nature. It is easier, someone has said, to smash an atom than a prejudice” (as cited in Clark, 1979).

In the early days of desegregation there were too many reports of segregated classes, removal of minority teachers and principals, failure to integrate school activities, segregated classroom seating, discriminatory counseling, curricula that ignored minority history, and many other conditions that limited or prevented full access for minority students. Additionally, these conditions limited positive diversity experiences for White and minority students. Many educators, advocates, and researchers realized that factors influencing the nature of the transition from segregation to desegregation, and ultimately to integration, could shift the academic and social outcomes of students in these schools (Schofield, 1981). Most school staff members, who themselves attended segregated schools and were trained to work in one-race schools, did not have the knowledge and tools to address these issues.

Desegregation orders and plans by the late 1960s often went far beyond simply transferring students. The Supreme Court ended token desegregation that had been occurring through “freedom of choice” plans in 1968 and ordered “root and branch” desegregation to eliminate “dual school systems” organized on the basis of race (Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, 1968). To fulfill the constitutional requirement to create “unitary” school systems that were fully integrated, school desegregation plans had to include desegregation of teachers and students, and equalization of educational opportunities, facilities, and curriculum. The plans usually included strategies for informing the public of the plan, managing crises, retraining teachers and staff, developing new educational materials, and implementing policies for fair discipline and participation in
student activities among the various groups of students.

Following the Supreme Court’s decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), there was massive controversy over court orders using tools such as busing to more thoroughly desegregate urban schools. Despite disagreements, both critics and supporters of desegregation recognized that help was needed in the suddenly integrated schools in hundreds of cities. Government responded, for a time. The Emergency School Aid Act was a bipartisan law initially intended to smooth the crises caused by sudden desegregation of urban school systems. In this act, negotiated between the Nixon White House and Senate liberals led by Senator Walter Mondale, Congress enacted a policy of giving money to schools to support successful desegregation. Regardless of whether they supported desegregation plans, both sides could agree that if the plans must be implemented, schools required help to prevent dangerous cleavages in communities, such as those that did such severe damage to several cities, including Little Rock, Birmingham, and Boston, after racial violence flared. The programs funded under the desegregation assistance law did not provide money for busing itself, but they did provide hundreds of millions of dollars for helping the schools adapt.

The Emergency School Aid Act (Orfield, 1978, chap. 9) lasted from 1972 until 1981, when the Reagan administration ended it (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). While in operation, the law funded training, intervention programs, new curricula development, magnet schools for voluntary desegregation, and large-scale research or ways to improve race relations. Because courts were actively requiring desegregation, there was interest in obtaining help, and, as a result, school districts eagerly applied for these funds. The funding was so enthusiastically sought, in fact, that districts were often willing to do additional desegregation of students and teachers, not required by their own plan, to get it. Many magnet schools began and spread rapidly under this program, as school choice became a significant element in American education for the first time. The law required that magnets be desegregated—choice was designed to combine equity with educational options.

During the Carter administration, the law was rewritten to incorporate the lessons of the major evaluation studies, which showed that aid made a substantial difference for both achievement and race relations, and was needed for at least several years to facilitate successful change. At the same time, the National Institute of Education supported research on desegregated schools and developed a research agenda for the field. Research on the effects of the programs and changes funded by the desegregation assistance law produced important findings about the conditions under which race relations and educational achievement gains were most likely to occur in interracial schools. During the desegregation era the Black-White gap declined sharply. Major studies documented the benefits of certain classroom techniques in mixed-race classrooms. Teachers and administrators facing racial change were given a great deal of inservice preparation.

During this same period, education schools across the country and their national accreditation agencies made significant efforts to require training of teachers in multicultural education. Sensing a large new market, publishers supported substantial revisions of texts that had an exclusively White perspective. Many districts commissioned new curriculum about local minority contributions. At the same time, the spread of bilingual education requirements and funding under the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, as well as the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision about the rights of non-English-speaking students, brought into the schools an increasing number of Latino teachers and supported beginning education in a child’s native language. Several desegregation orders, including those in school districts in Denver, Boston, and Texas, contained specific programs for language-minority students and their teachers.

The need for these efforts did not cease, but the support did. Training, school district programs, and research withered away. The Reagan
administration in its first months opposed desegregation orders and eliminated the desegregation assistance program that had made desegregation plans work better; the research operation was shut down, and for the next quarter century there would be no significant federal funding for research or policy on effective race relations in diverse schools (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The Reagan administration did, however, support research on “White flight,” which it used to oppose desegregation in federal courts.

The country turned in a different direction when the standards movement emerged in the aftermath of the Reagan administration’s *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983. The basic ideas of standards-based reform were that the social context of schools could be overlooked—both the problems of racial and economic inequality and the positive possibilities of racial diversity—and that standards, requirements, and sanctions would produce more equal outcomes in and of themselves or, if necessary, with the additional pressure of market competition from charter and private schools. Part of the basic analysis of the “excellence” movement was that schools had been diverted from traditional education responsibilities to counterproductive social reform efforts.

Virtually all states adopted this agenda, which was reinforced by the agreement between President George H. W. Bush and the nation’s governors in 1989. At the Charlottesville Educational Summit, the National Governors Association’s chair, Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, led the governors to agreement with the president on six national education goals to which the country should aspire by 2000, from school readiness to increasing high school graduation rates. Goal 3 (U.S. students should be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement) and goal 4 (all students should demonstrate achievement in core subjects) in particular spurred the bipartisan standards agenda (National Governors Association, 1989, 2000). The program to achieve the national goals became known as the America 2000 program, but it was not until the Goals 2000: Educate America Act passed in 1993 during Clinton’s first presidential term that the six goals were adopted as part of federal education law. In addition, the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (known as the Improving America’s Schools Act, or IASA) further drove the standards movement by requiring that all states adopt a system of standards, assessments, and accountability to measure student performance in order to qualify for Title I funding. The IASA also required states to disaggregate student performance data for schools’ annual yearly progress by race, gender, and socioeconomic status, but sanctions were not seriously enforced. Ultimately, none of the goals for closing the racial gap were realized and the gaps widened in some dimensions.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), however, imposed more demanding goals and deadlines on all American schools. NCLB had strong goals and sweeping sanctions for equalizing achievement among minority and White children, but had no requirement to equalize the very unequal schooling opportunities or take any action to end segregation of minority students in inferior schools and improve race relations. By insisting on equal outcomes from patently unequal schools highly segregated by race and poverty, the 2001 law’s sanctions tended to strongly penalize minority schools and teachers (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005).

The effects of segregated education cannot be cured by merely enacting strong demands for achievement gains and changing nothing else in schools that are usually unequal in every major dimension relating to student achievement, including the quality of teachers, curriculum offered, and the level of competition (peer group). In fact, enforcing rigid standards without equalizing opportunity can exacerbate the inequalities by stigmatizing minority schools as failures, narrowing their curriculum to endless testing drills, and leading strong, experienced teachers to transfer to less pressured situations. The massive publicity given to test scores may also help destabilize residentially integrated
communities, as realtors use test scores to steer White buyers to outlying White communities. Thus, the ironic impact of ignoring the inequality of the segregated schools in the name of standards is to worsen them.

In the past quarter century of incredible demographic transformation of the American school-age population there has been virtually no investment in either determining the best policies for extraordinarily complex school communities or even in applying well-documented programs and policies that are likely to make things better. Federal funding of desegregation research and experiments ended in the early 1980s, and private foundations do not generally support research about these topics, which has drastically limited the development of new knowledge that could assist schools with the racial transformation. This myopia makes school communities less effective internally and much weaker as anchors for multiracial communities dealing with pressures of racial stratification, fear, and racial transformation.

NOTES

1. The right for Latinos to desegregate was not acknowledged by the Supreme Court until 1973, after most active desegregation efforts had already ended. In striking contrast to the Johnson administration’s role in the South, the Nixon administration did virtually nothing to enforce this policy.

2. Mondale, who became Jimmy Carter’s vice president, chaired the Senate select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, which compiled 30 volumes of congressional hearings on all aspects of desegregation and issued a comprehensive report in 1972 that included a chapter on conditions for successful integration (U.S. Senate, 1972, chapter 17).

3. Much of that research is summarized in Hawley, Crain, Rossell, Schofield, & Fernandez (1983).

REFERENCES


Green v. County School Board of New Kent County. 391 U.S. 430 (1968).


At this 50th anniversary of the landmark Brown decision, one of the most important questions about desegregation policy has remained unanswered: What impact did school desegregation have on the “hearts and minds” of students who lived through it? Indeed, little is known about how graduates of racially diverse schools understand the ways in which their school experiences shaped their lives.

In an effort to answer this question, our team of researchers from Teachers College, Columbia University, and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) set out to study what school desegregation meant to the people who attended racially diverse schools in the late 1970s.1 We conducted in-depth case studies of six different school districts across the country, focusing on one racially mixed high school in each.2 At these sites, we interviewed policymakers, activists, and educators, as well as students who graduated from these schools in 1980—during some of the peak years of school integration. In total, we interviewed 540 people, including 242 high school graduates from the Class of 1980.

Jennifer Jellison Holme, Amy Stuart Wells, and Anita Tijerina Revilla present the results of their study of graduates of the class of 1980 from six high schools in six different states that desegregated as a result of Brown v. Board of Education and other court orders described in the previous reading by Gary Orfield. Using random sampling, they interviewed 40 to 45 graduates from each high school. Of the 245 individuals interviewed, 33% were African American, 56% white, 9% Latino, and 2% other race/ethnicity. The results of this study help us to understand both how desegregation worked in these high schools and what it meant for those individuals forced to attend the desegregated schools.

Questions to consider for this reading:

1. What was the effect of desegregation on the school lives of white, African American, and Latino students?

2. How did desegregation affect these students in their later lives?

3. How do their findings from interviews with students relate to the previous reading by Orfield that described the history of segregation and resegregation?
In this article, we discuss one of the central findings from this study: what the graduates said about the impact of attending a desegregated high school on their understanding of race and on their lives in a racially diverse society. We found that all of the graduates—from each of the racial and ethnic groups—expressed gratitude for having had the opportunity to attend a racially diverse school. Reflecting back, these graduates said that their public high school years provided them rare opportunities to come together with and get to know people of other racial or ethnic backgrounds. This does not mean that attending a desegregated school was easy. In fact, in a number of cases racial tension and distance fostered mistrust, hurt feelings, and frustration. Furthermore, we know that in these schools, like most racially and ethnically diverse schools in this country, students were resegregated by classrooms where most of the students in high-track classes were white while most of the students in the lower-level classes were African American or Latino (see Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2008). Still, nearly all graduates we interviewed—even those who have few fond memories of high school—said that they learned invaluable lessons about race and living in a diverse society that they never could have learned elsewhere. In fact, these graduates emphasized that by living through the daily challenges of dealing with racial differences in high school, they gained insights and understandings that they could have never appreciated by simply reading about race or discussing it in the context of a one-race school.

Despite these similarities, there were important differences across racial and ethnic groups in terms of what the students learned about race and how it has helped them as adults. In other words, while both white graduates and graduates of color said that their diverse schooling experiences prepared them to be more comfortable around people who are racially different from themselves, the specific skills they gained and the meaning they made of the lessons were quite different. For instance, many white graduates said they learned to be more comfortable in interracial settings in part because they had broken down stereotypes of what members of “other” races are like. While graduates of color also said they were more comfortable in interracial settings and had broken down some stereotypes of Whites, many of them added that one of the most valuable lessons they gained from high school was preparation for the discrimination they would face in a white-dominated society. Therefore, these graduates believe their schooling experiences helped them learn how to be less fearful of all-white or racially mixed environments, more confident in their ability to compete in such settings, and better able to cope with prejudice.

One of the most interesting aspects of the findings from our study is that graduates only came to understand what they learned from their high school experience after they left high school. While a small number of studies have been conducted on the effect of school desegregation on students’ racial attitudes, the vast majority of that research has asked students to reflect on their views while they are still in school (Schofield, 1995). Our study, which interviewed graduates 20 years after they left high school, shows that much of what they understood about their school experiences was hindsight—lessons that they did not really appreciate until they had different experiences as adults and interacted with peers who had attended more racially segregated schools. We argue that our findings are highly significant in terms of efforts to fully appreciate the impact of high school desegregation on students’ lives because the graduates we interviewed could not have fully articulated the “lessons they learned”
from racially mixed schools when they were still in high school. Paradoxically, then, at the same time that these graduates were coming to understand what these experiences had meant to them, school desegregation has being curtailed and even eliminated in hundreds of school districts across the country (Orfield, Eaton, & The Harvard Project, 1996; Orfield & Lee, 2004). In this way, our study documents long-term consequences of a policy that the government had started to dismantle by the late 1980s, long before we even understood its impact on those who experienced it.

In this article, then, we explain the significance of our findings about what graduates learned from attending racially diverse schools in light of the current trend toward increasingly segregated schools in this country and policymakers’ resistance to promoting diversity in public education.

**The Understanding Race and Education Study**

As we noted above, our study consisted of historical case studies and interviews with graduates of the Class of 1980 from six racially diverse high schools in the U.S. We chose to study the history of these schools during this time because most desegregation in this country did not occur until the late 1960s and early 1970s when white resistance had finally been squelched by additional federal court orders. Thus, the Class of 1980, which entered kindergarten in 1967, was moving through the elementary grades just as the old system of segregation was finally breaking down. National data show that members of the Class of 1980, on average, were more likely to have classmates of other races than any class before them or more recent classes of the last 15 years.

**Living Through School Desegregation: You Had to Be There**

With very few exceptions, the graduates we interviewed said that, as a result of attending their racially diverse high schools, they felt more prepared for a racially diverse society than they would otherwise be. All the graduates said that their high school experiences left them with a deeper understanding of people of other backgrounds and an increased sense of comfort in interracial settings. In fact, many of these graduates stressed the importance of their daily experiences of negotiating race in high school as one of the most challenging yet rewarding aspects of their education. The lessons they learned from these experiences, they said, could not have been taught through history books or documentary films; rather, many observed simply that they had to be there, living in these diverse schools on a daily basis. Furthermore, it is important to note that graduates of all races say that they often only appreciated how valuable their diverse schooling experiences were once they left high school and interacted with people who had not attended diverse schools. These findings highlight the need for policymakers and the public to pay attention to the voices of these graduates now—in their adult years—in evaluating whether desegregation was a success or failure and whether to reconsider our national retreat from policies designed to foster diversity in public schools.

Still, we do not mean to imply that these graduates learned exactly the same things in the same ways across racial groups and school context. In fact, we found that how these lessons were learned and what these lessons mean to our participants today, differ for the white graduates and graduates of color. The lessons graduates learned also varied across the six high schools, according to their context, in subtle but important ways.

**Experiencing Integration First-Hand: An Altered “World View”**

Perhaps the most important testament to the power of policies designed to promote school integration is the strong belief by graduates...
that the type of lessons they learned in high school about diversity could only be gained through personal, day-to-day experience. In other words, these graduates reflected, such life-lessons could not be gained through books or courses on multicultural education or festivals celebrating diversity—they had to be lived first-hand in shared spaces and times. A number of graduates also recognized the role that the schools themselves played in teaching these lessons, as it was through their high schools that they had the opportunity to spend many years with the same cohort of students, and therefore had a chance to get to know members of other racial groups and learn how to negotiate racial differences.

Indeed, many graduates contrasted their own experience in high school with those of their friends and spouses who attended racially homogeneous schools—the type of schools that are becoming all the more common in the U.S. as schools re-segregate across the country (Orfield & Lee, 2004)—and observed that those segregated settings provide no genuine opportunities for students to learn about race or to learn to negotiate racial difference. As a white female West Charlotte High School graduate said: “You cannot suddenly teach someone how to get along with someone [who’s] different from them. You can’t learn that from a book!”

Rather, many of these graduates note, having day-to-day high school experiences with members of other racial groups—the good and the bad—left them with a fundamentally altered way of seeing the world. As a white female Shaker Heights High School graduate explained in talking about what she learned by being there:

I mean, that it’s a world view thing . . . it’s not just a sociological little experiment, it’s your entire world view is altered by who you’re growing up with, and it’s not just who you’re going to school with, but who you’re growing up with, who you are sharing every minute of your day and every secret that you have. When that, when you have that experience, that alters your entire world view, which then is the lens that you’re operating through every day.

Though some would argue that such lessons about race could be learned at any time in one’s life, a number of graduates said that these lessons were all the more powerful to them because they were learned when they were in their youth. For instance, an African American graduate of Dwight Morrow High School reflected that having had interracial contact in schools from a young age was particularly helpful to her:

That really put me ahead of the game being exposed to children, innocent children from other groups because there is no pretense about anything. You actually learn what people are about because you are kids, you don’t have time to be pretentious.

Similarly, a graduate of John Muir High School who is of both white and subcontinent Indian descent said that while he faced some interracial conflict during his high school days, he also feels that learning about race at a young age was important to him:

I found [John Muir HS] maybe a little bit harder than somewhere else, but I also knew that it was teaching me life lessons that no college can teach you. And those are invaluable. I know a lot of people who do a lot of college work and they test really well, but you put them out in the real world and . . . they can’t make it.

While graduates of different racial backgrounds experienced their racially mixed high schools in very different ways, the one thing that all of them took away from that experience as they reflect back 20 years later was the impact that living through desegregation had on them. These lived experiences, as we shall show, taught graduates a number of important lessons about race that profoundly affected the way they interact with other racial groups, and the way they view the world. Below we discuss the racial and school-level variations on this theme of “having to be there” to show that Whites and students of color had slightly different ways of making meaning of the value of their experiences.
White Graduates: Increased Comfort, Decreased Fear

While all of the white graduates we interviewed said they believe attending a racially diverse school changed them in lasting, positive ways, we found that the more specific lessons that white graduates took away from their school experiences both differed from those of the graduates of color and varied to some degree by school.

Increased Comfort and Understanding

The one consistent finding from our interviews with white graduates across the six high schools was the increased sense of comfort that they say they gained in racially mixed and predominantly non-white settings as a result of their high school experiences. Many white graduates say that because they attended diverse high schools, as adults they were more at ease in interactions with people of different backgrounds and more willing to engage in conversations with people of color than many other Whites they know. As a white graduate from Austin High School said of his experience: “It gave me the ability to relate to just about any person and feel good about it, and to be sincere—not putting on an act.” Similarly, a white female graduate from Topeka High noted, as a result of attending a racially diverse high school:

I can walk into any room or any situation and I don’t care if they are black, yellow, white, orange or whatever. I feel that I can have a conversation with anybody or not be afraid to talk to somebody just because of their social status or because of the color of their skin.

Many white graduates say that they only realized how much more comfortable they were in diverse settings when they encountered racially mixed situations after high school with a friend or spouse who had attended predominately white schools. For example, a white graduate of Dwight Morrow High School recalled an evening when she attended a racially mixed retirement party for her mother, who taught in a predominantly black school district. Her husband, who attended predominately white rural schools, had a very different reaction to the experience from hers:

You know, the room is mostly Black, the families of the retired teachers, the other teachers that came, and a lot of them were teachers I had growing up, and you know, they’d see me, “Oh, how are you,” and I introduced [my husband], and his comment, which was sort of a sad thing later on, he’s like, “Wow.” He had a great time, everybody was so nice. I don’t remember his exact words but, “God, they were actually really nice.” And I felt bad for him for a minute, I was like, “Yeah, they are.” It was funny, but he doesn’t know any different than that, and he still has that mindset although he’s much more open-minded than his family . . . but he doesn’t understand, he doesn’t know a lot of things, so whenever he doesn’t know he reverts back to what he knew growing up.

The point illustrated in this one story is reverberated throughout dozens of transcripts as these graduates came to realize how different they are from Whites who were educated in segregated schools.

Many white graduates traced their increased sense of comfort in racially mixed environments today to the way in which their experiences with members of other racial groups in high school challenged their own misconceptions about people of color. It was through daily, up-close interactions with members of other racial groups in high school, many white graduates observed, that allowed them to see through their previously held stereotypes. A white graduate from Topeka High noted:

[My high school experience] gave me an opportunity to know that some people that were Black or Hispanic that are not like stereotypes at all. . . . I think that my ideas about other races at that point in my life had been probably just formed by television stereotypes and there wasn’t any real life experience before this for me.
A number of white graduates also recalled specific incidents with students of color during their high school years, which changed how they viewed those students. For example, a white West Charlotte High School graduate said that early on in her high school career she was afraid of the African American students at her school, but after having an experience where several African American students helped her stand up to a white high school bully, she said:

It just changed that fear and it changed a lot of the prejudice that I had carried because of stories told to me by my neighbors. So at that point I just . . . I really lost a lot of my prejudice and that's why I'm so grateful, to this day, that . . . I did go to a desegregated school because I feel that just with family values, with my friend's ideas, I think I would have been extremely narrow minded, extremely prejudiced growing up.

Like this woman, many graduates told us that had they not attended their high schools and had an opportunity to have up-close interactions with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, they would be more prejudiced, closed-minded, and even fearful of people of color.

**Decreased Fear**

Part of feeling more at ease around people of color, the white graduates noted, is realizing that the fear that most white people have of African Americans and Latinos is unfounded. Many white graduates, in fact, said that their experiences with people of color in high school made them feel less fearful in interracial settings, particularly compared with Whites they know who had attended all-white schools. The decreased fear white graduates report as a result of going to a racially mixed school is particularly important in light of U.S. culture and media, which often suggests that people of color and predominately non-white settings are something to be feared and avoided (Williams, 2000).

Several graduates only recognized how much less fearful of non-white settings they were when they encountered a predominately non-white situation with a spouse or a friend who had attended majority-white schools. For instance, a white male graduate from Shaker Heights High School said that he realized how comfortable and unafraid he was around people of color on a recent family trip to Baltimore, when he and his wife got on a bus that was filled with Latinos and African Americans. He contrasted his sense of comfort in getting on the bus to his wife's unease:

I think we were the only white people on the bus, there were some Hispanic people, African American. . . . My wife . . . went to pretty much an all white high school, and to listen to the way her father talks and, you know, he hadn't been around too many minorities . . . but I felt very comfortable, you know, getting on the bus and I really didn't feel out of place. . . . But I could definitely tell that my wife was not, you know, a hundred percent comfortable getting on that bus.

Another white male graduate from Austin High said that his white wife's lack of experience with students of color in high school left her extremely fearful in predominately non-white situations. He contrasts her fear with his own feelings of comfort, which he feels he gained through daily interactions in high school with members of different racial and ethnic groups:

If you just hang out with a bunch of white people and . . . and you do everything that you can to say I'm going to act like a nice, open minded person when I get around these black folks and Mexican folks, you're not going to be as good at it. You're going to be more uptight. You're going to be stressed out. It's going to be a problem. There's . . . there are all kinds of things. Whereas because I was around black folks and Mexican folks and learned that they weren't going to kill me and you know, I can . . . I can go to the . . . to the Texas Relays where my girlfriend, now wife, is hyperventilating [and I said] "It is correct that we're in a group of 20,000 people and 75% of 'em are black people, but we're going to be all right. They're not going to hurt us. They're not going to knife us. They're not going to kill us. They're not going to..."
rob us. We’re going to be okay. Just act nice and . . . treat people the way you like to be treated and . . . and you’re going to be okay.”

An interesting and unexpected finding of this study is that several of the white graduates who reported living through uncomfortable racial situations in high school, where they felt intimidated or physically threatened by members of another racial group, also said that, as a result of these experiences, they ultimately felt a decreased fear of people of color as adults.

For example, a white graduate of John Muir High School who reported feeling intimidated by the African American students said that ultimately her high school experience left her with not only a decreased fear of people of color, but a longing for more diverse environments than the all-white suburb she currently lives in. She notes:

I don’t feel fear when I see a black person or a Hispanic person walking down the street. In fact, I feel kind of like . . . I feel kind of nostalgic ‘cause it reminds me of growing up. . . . ‘Cause around here, all I see are pretty much white people everywhere I look. So I’m grateful for that because I think some of the people that I knew and I met in San Diego grew up in an all-white neighborhood and I think they couldn’t help but look at black people or Hispanic people as different or as a person of color and not just a person. Yeah. So, like, in the workforce, I think, having . . . that background hopefully made me . . . look at people as equal. And I judge them based on their abilities, not based on the color of their skin. And when I encounter people that don’t have that same belief, it makes me really uncomfortable.

Thus, even white graduates of the two high schools in our study in which Whites were in the minority—John Muir High School and Dwight Morrow High School—and where many Whites reported a higher level of racial uneasiness—and even fear while in school—say that those experiences ultimately left them more at ease in racially mixed settings, in part because they learned how to handle difficult interracial situations.

Increased Empathy and Insight

Another important outcome of attending racially mixed schools, at least for a small number of white graduates, was the better understanding they say they gained about what it was like to be a person of color in the U.S. In this way, these graduates’ high school experiences played a very important role in opening their eyes to other ways of seeing and knowing the world. For instance, a white West Charlotte graduate said that he not only learned an appreciation for African American culture but he also learned what it was like to be a minority—an experience he realizes that most Whites have not had:

I mean, I think I’m more attuned a little bit more attuned towards black music, black history, black things that I might not have been exposed to. And at West Charlotte I . . . I mean, there were times when I felt like I was the minority and I think that was good for me, you know, in a way, to know a little bit what it feels like to walk down the hall full of these people and feeling like, ok, I’m the odd man out here, and to know what that feels like, you know, to not always be among the majority and on top of your game.

According to a white Topeka High School graduate, being exposed to different perspectives and points of view was one of the main ways he feels he was changed by attending his racially mixed high school. In such a setting, he said:

You get a lot of different input from different walks of life. . . . I have never been pulled over [by the police] simply because I met a profile. But I have friends who have been pulled over because they matched a specific profile. Those are issues that I wouldn’t be aware of if I went to a totally Caucasian school. Or I wouldn’t have experience with that.

A white male graduate from Shaker Heights High noted that his experience in his racially mixed community and in his schools gave him a critique of the larger society and caused him to
question why most communities in the U.S. are so segregated. He notes,

> [Growing up] you develop a sense that this is the way the world is and then you go out in the world and you realize that that’s not the way the world is, and then you can question the way the world is rather than the way Shaker Heights is . . . So, I think, in a subtle sense, it develops sort of a devil’s advocate mentality.

While this finding was less universal across the white graduates, the ability of these graduates to see the world from the point of view of people of color and even to question the larger social structure was all the more profound because, more often than not, we found that in racially diverse high school classrooms there was very little discussion about race and racial inequity (see Revilla, Wells, & Holme, 2004). These lessons these graduates learned outside of the classroom about racial inequality—often in spite of their formal schooling experience—attest to the potential of policies promoting racially diverse schools to help promote a deeper understanding of racial difference and foster interracial understanding.

**Graduates of Color: Survival Skills for a White World**

Looking at racial understandings from the other side of the color line we also saw the powerful impact of desegregated schools on African Americans, Latinos, and other graduates of color more than 20 years later. Not only did these graduates’ experiences differ to some degree from the white graduates but, like Whites, the lessons learned varied somewhat depending on the high school they attended. In particular, the racial make-up of these schools and the behaviors of the teachers and administrators in these schools seemed to matter a great deal.

**Increased Comfort, Less Intimidation**

Like Whites, graduates of color we interviewed said that going to a desegregated high school prepared them for a diverse society in that they had a greater sense of comfort in interracial settings. In saying that, many of these graduates of color meant that they were not simply prepared to get along with others but that they were prepared to function in predominately white work and social settings—often dominated by powerful Whites—that would otherwise be intimidating to many people of color.

An African American male graduate from Dwight Morrow High School said that his experience with Whites in high school gave him a confidence in racially diverse settings that he may not have otherwise gained. He reflects on what was gained from his high school experience this way:

> Today I would say that it makes me feel comfortable, that I can go anywhere and not feel intimidated, I just always feel like I belong and it didn’t matter who was in the majority or minority, that I knew how to deal with all of them. . . . It definitely gave me the confidence to know that it didn’t matter, people were people, and I could just interact.

Above all, graduates of color say that had it not been for desegregation, they would have gone through segregated schools with little or no exposure to Whites. The exposure that they did get in high school gave them a sense of comfort in interracial work and social settings that they find very useful today. As an African American female graduate from Dwight Morrow High School says:

> I feel that it really shaped me in terms of my ability to move into different circles of people. I’m not limited in terms of, you know, when I walk into a place, I can speak the same king’s English, I can do that, and I can speak to my friends on a different level. So I think that it’s made me a diverse person, and I was able to see other lifestyles and how people live. I mean, it’s not, you know, you have some people in the inner city who never really experience, you know, rub shoulders with people that have six-figure incomes, and it’s not, in other words, I don’t get nervous when I’m dealing with someone who is a CEO of a company because his
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experiences and my experiences are so different. You know, I’ve been around certain things that have afforded me a certain confidence.

As with Whites, the graduates of color reported they now feel a level of comfort in racially mixed or predominately white environments that could only be gained through the lived experience of attending a racially diverse school. In addition, what many graduates of color talked about in terms of the effect of their school experiences on their racial attitudes were understandings that they did not and could not appreciate until after they left those schools and were finding their way into college, jobs, families, and houses. Like Whites, these graduates said they only fully came to appreciate the skills they gained when, as adults, they met other people of color who had attended segregated, predominately minority schools. For example, an African American female graduate from West Charlotte High School said that she felt she had gained a useful set of skills vis-à-vis her African American friends who had attended all-black schools:

I know a lot of black people have only been around Blacks and they really can’t see past being around anyone other than Blacks. So, you know, I feel like that has helped me in a way that . . . that I was already comfortable enough being around a different racial group to now, when there are so many different racial groups that I’m around on a daily basis, it doesn’t bother me at all.

Similarly, an African American graduate of Topeka High School said his adult experiences in a large city in Texas, where he has lived for nearly 20 years, highlighted for him the comfort that he gained interacting with Whites by attending Topeka High. He says that as a result of attending such a diverse high school, he is far less intimidated by Whites than the African American people he has met in Texas who have not had the chance to interact with Whites in school.

For graduates of color, then, living through the experience of attending racially diverse schools gave them a greater sense of comfort in inter racial settings compared with their peers who had attended segregated schools. Even those graduates who attended racially mixed schools where interracial relationships were not necessarily positive also say that they gained valuable skills from their high school experiences.

Learning to Face Prejudice

For the graduates of color, learning comfort in racially diverse settings has different implications given their different locations in the racial hierarchy of the U.S. society. This means that not only were they learning to feel more comfortable around people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also that they were learning to deal with prejudice and cope with discrimination in ways they would not have learned had they attended all–African American or all-Latino schools.

The way they learned to cope with this discrimination differed, however, depending on the high school these graduates attended. For example, a number of graduates of color from Austin High School said that attending AHS helped them better deal with prejudice as adults because they encountered it so often at AHS. A Hispanic male graduate of AHS noted, had he not attended Austin High: “I wouldn’t know what the word ‘prejudice’ was. I would have been in like a cocoon. . . . I was prepared. High school prepared me for prejudice. It did. That’s what helped me.”

Those graduates of color who had more positive experiences dealing with white students in their high schools said they were better able to cope with the prejudice they encountered because they knew first-hand that all Whites weren’t as racist as the ones they met as adults. An African American female graduate of Shaker Heights High School reflected on her positive experiences with Whites at her high school:

It prepared me for the ignorance of college to understand everyone’s not ignorant. I knew that, so it was able to probably help me have more confidence and be able to deal with the racial discrimination I did
deal with in college [that] I [had] never dealt with in my life. So, I think having friends that were not African American probably prepared me for, you know, the ignorance that I had to deal with.

Even those graduates of color who say they had particularly painful racial experiences, such as being discriminated against by teachers or counselors, resegregated into lower level classes, or socially shunned or intimidated by white students, say that they are glad they had the opportunity to attend those schools, to learn the lessons that they did. As an African American female graduate from Austin High School reflects: “I’m glad I went to Austin High in spite of the pain and difficulty. I’m glad I went to school there. I think it prepared me in some ways for the real world. Not that I necessarily like the real world, the way it is, but you’ve got to start somewhere.”

In this way, the graduates of color from our study show us that not all lessons learned in a racially diverse school are positive. In fact, some of the stories we heard from graduates of these schools—of all races and ethnicities—were quite upsetting and no doubt have had a lasting impact. Still, these experiences taught them lessons that they now find valuable as adults navigating a racially divided and unequal world.

NOTES

1. Our study, entitled “Understanding Race and Education,” was funded by the Spencer Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. We are grateful to these foundations for their support, but the views expressed in this article are our own, based on our analysis and findings.

2. By “racially mixed,” we mean between 40% and 75% of any one race, and no more than 25% of the racial balance of the city or town for any one race.

REFERENCES


In this reading, Linda Renzulli and Vincent Roscigno examine the growth and possible outcomes of the increase in the number of charter schools. These schools provide a radical approach to traditional schooling in the United States because they operate outside of many regulations that dictate the structure of schooling across the country. The idea of charter schools, embedded in a “market economy” framework, also involves parents in the selection of schools for their children. Yet, as the authors argue, by changing the focus of accountability in schools these new freedoms for school administrators, teachers, and parents come with problems as well as hopes for the future of education.

Questions to consider for this reading:
1. How and when did the charter school movement begin?
2. How do charter schools differ from public schools?
3. Do you think changes in accountability described in this reading will lead to improved education for the nation’s poorest children? Why or why not?

According to the U.S. Department of Education, “No Child Left Behind is designed to change the culture of America’s schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on what works.” Charter schools—a recent innovation in U.S. education—are one of the most visible developments aimed at meeting these goals. Although they preceded the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, charter schools are now supported politically and financially through NCLB. Charter schools are public schools set up and administered outside the traditional bureaucratic constraints of local school boards, with the goal of creating choice, autonomy, and accountability.

Unlike regular public schools, charter schools are developed and managed by individuals, groups of parents, community members, teachers, or education-management organizations. In exchange for their independence from most state and local regulations (except those related to health, safety, and nondiscrimination), they must uphold their contracts with the local or state school board or risk being closed. Each provides its own guidelines for establishing rules and procedures, including curriculum, subject to evaluation by the state in which it resides.

Charter schools are among the most rapidly growing educational institutions in the United States today. No charter schools existed before 1990, but such schools are now operating in...
40 states and the District of Columbia. According to the Center for Educational Reform, 3,977 charter schools are now educating more than a million students.

Charter schools have received bipartisan support and media accolades. This, however, is surprising. The true academic value of the educational choices that charter schools provide to students, as well as their broader implications for the traditional system of public education, are simply unknown—a fact that became obvious in November 2004, when voters in the state of Washington rejected—for the third time—legislation allowing the creation of charter schools. Driven by an alliance of parents, teachers, and teacher unions against sponsorship by powerful figures such as Bill Gates, this rejection went squarely against a decade-long trend. Reflecting on Washington’s rejection, a state Democrat told the New York Times, “Charter schools will never have a future here now until there is conclusive evidence, nationwide, that these schools really work. Until the issue of student achievement gets resolved, I’d not even attempt to start over again in the Legislature.”

THE RATIONALE

Most justifications for charter schools argue that the traditional system of public schooling is ineffective and that the introduction of competition and choice can resolve any deficiencies. The leading rationale is that accountability standards (for educational outcomes and student progress), choice (in curriculum, structure, and discipline), and autonomy (for teachers and parents) will generate higher levels of student achievement. The result will be high-quality schools for all children, particularly those from poor and minority backgrounds, and higher levels of student achievement.

While wealthy families have always been able to send their children to private schools, other Americans have historically had fewer, if any, options. Proponents suggest that charter schools can address such inequality by allowing all families, regardless of wealth, to take advantage of these new public educational options. Opponents contend that charter schools cannot fix broader educational problems; if anything, they become instruments of segregation, deplete public school systems of their resources, and undermine the public good.

Given the rationales for charter schools before and after the NCLB Act, it is surprising how few assessments have been made of charter school functioning, impacts on achievement, or the implications of choice for school systems. Only a handful of studies have attempted to evaluate systematically the claims of charter school effectiveness, and few of these have used national data. The various justifications for charter schools—including the desire to increase achievement in the public school system—warrant attention, as do concrete research and evidence on whether such schools work. The debate, however, involves more than simply how to enhance student achievement. It also involves educational competition and accountability, individual choice and, most fundamentally, education’s role in fostering the “public good.”

IS THERE PROOF IN THE PUDDING?

Do students in charter schools do better than they would in traditional public schools? Unfortunately, the jury is still out, and the evidence is mixed. Profiles in the New Yorker, Forbes, Time, and Newsweek, for example, highlight the successes of individual charter schools in the inner cities of Washington, DC, and New York, not to mention anecdotal examples offered by high-profile advocates like John Walton and Bill Gates. While anecdotes and single examples suggest that charter schools may work, they hardly constitute proof or even systematic evidence that they always do. In fact, broader empirical studies using representative and national data suggest that many charter schools have failed.

One noteworthy study, released by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 2004, reports that charter schools are not providing a
better education than traditional public schools. Moreover, they are not boosting student achievement. Using fourth- and eighth-grade test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress across all states with charter schools, the report finds that charter-school students perform less well, on average, in math and reading than their traditional-school counterparts. There appear to be no significant differences among eighth-graders and no discernable difference in black-white achievement gaps across school type.

Because the results reported in the AFT study—which have received considerable media attention—do not incorporate basic demographic, regional, or school characteristics simultaneously, they can only relate average differences across charter schools and public schools. But this ignores the huge effects of family background, above and beyond school environment. Without accounting for the background attributes of students themselves, not to mention other factors such as the race and social-class composition of the student body, estimates of the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools are overstated.

In response to the 2004 AFT report, economists Carolyn Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff compared charter schools to surrounding public schools. Their results contradict many of the AFT’s findings. They examined students who applied to but did not attend charter schools because they lost lotteries for spots. Hoxby and Rockoff found that, compared to their lotteried-out fellow applicants, students who attended charter schools in Chicago scored higher in both math and reading. This is true especially in the early elementary grades compared to nearby public schools with similar racial compositions. Their work and that of others also shows that older charter schools perform better than newly formed ones—perhaps suggesting that school stability and effectiveness require time to take hold. Important weaknesses nevertheless remain in the research design. For example, Hoxby and Rockoff conducted their study in a single city—Chicago—and thus it does not represent the effect of charter schools in general.

As with the research conducted by the AFT, we should interpret selective case studies and school-level comparisons with caution. Individual student background is an important force in shaping student achievement, yet it rarely receives attention in this research or in the charter school achievement debate more generally. The positive influence of charter schools, where it is found, could easily be a function of more advantaged student populations drawn from families with significant educational resources at home. We know from prior research that parents of such children are more likely to understand schooling options and are motivated to ensure their children’s academic success. Since family background, parental investments, and parental educational involvement typically trump school effects in student achievement, it is likely that positive charter school effects are simply spurious.

More recently, a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), using sophisticated models, appropriate demographic controls, and a national sample, has concurred with the AFT report—charter schools are not producing children who score better on standardized achievement tests. The NCES report showed that average achievement in math and reading in public schools and in charter schools that were linked to a school district did not differ statistically. Charter schools not associated with a public school district, however, scored significantly less well than their public school counterparts.

Nevertheless, neither side of the debate has shown conclusively, through rigorous, replicated, and representative research, whether charter schools boost student achievement. The NCES report mentioned above has, in our opinion, done the best job of examining the achievement issue and has shown that charter schools are not doing better than traditional public schools when it comes to improving achievement.

Clearly, in the case of charter schools, the legislative cart has been put before the empirical horse. Perhaps this is because the debate is about more than achievement. Charter school debates and legislation are rooted in more fundamental disagreements over competition, individualism,
and, most fundamentally, education’s role in the public good. This reflects an important and significant shift in the cultural evaluation of public education in the United States, at the crux of which is the application of a market-based economic model, complete with accompanying ideas of “competition” and “individualism.”

Competition and Accountability

To whom are charter schools accountable? Some say their clients, namely, the public. Others say the system, namely, their authorizers. If charter schools are accountable to the public, then competition between schools should ensure academic achievement and bureaucratic prudence. If charter schools are accountable to the system, policies and procedures should ensure academic achievement and bureaucratic prudence. In either case, the assumption is that charter schools will close when they are not successful. The successful application of these criteria, however, requires clear-cut standards, oversight, and accountability—which are currently lacking, according to many scholars. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of their advocates and legislators, charter schools are seldom held accountable in the market or by the political structures that create them.

In a “market” view of accountability, competition will ultimately breed excellence by “weeding out” ineffectual organizations. Through “ripple effects,” all schools will be forced to improve their standards. Much like business organizations, schools that face competition will survive only by becoming more efficient and producing a better overall product (higher levels of achievement) than their private and public school counterparts.

Social scientists, including the authors of this article, question this simplistic, if intuitively appealing, application of neoliberal business principles to the complex nature of the educational system, children’s learning, and parental choice for schools. If competition were leading to accountability, we would see parents pulling their children out of unsuccessful charter schools. But research shows that this seldom happens. Indeed, parents, particularly those with resources, typically choose schools for reasons of religion, culture, and social similarity rather than academic quality.

Nor are charter schools accountable to bureaucrats. Even though charter schools are not outperforming traditional public schools, relatively few (10 percent nationally) have actually been closed by their authorizers over the last decade. Although we might interpret a 10 percent closure rate as evidence of academic accountability at work, this would be misleading. Financial rather than academic issues are the principal reasons cited for these closures. By all indications, charter schools are not being held accountable to academic standards, either by their authorizers or by market forces.

In addition to measuring accountability through student performance, charter schools should also be held to standards of financial and educational quality. Here, some charter schools are faltering. From California to New York and Ohio, newspaper editorials question fiscal oversight. There are extreme cases such as the California Charter Academy, a publicly financed but privately run chain of 60 charter schools. Despite a budget of $100 million, this chain became insolvent in August 2004, leaving thousands of children without a school to attend.

More direct accountability issues include educational quality and annual reports to state legislatures; here, charter-school performance is poor or mixed. In Ohio, where nearly 60,000 students now attend charter schools, approximately one-quarter of these schools are not following the state’s mandate to report school-level test score results, and only 45 percent of the teachers at the state’s 250 charter schools hold full teaching certification. Oversight is further complicated by the creation of “online” charter schools, which serve 16,000 of Ohio’s public school students.

It is ironic that many charter schools are not held to the very standards of competition, quality, and accountability that legislators and advocates used to justify them in the first place. Perhaps this is why Fredrick Hess, a charter
school researcher, recently referred to accountability as applied to charter schools as little more than a “toothless threat.”

**INDIVIDUALISM OR INEQUALITY?**

The most obvious goal of education is student achievement. Public education in the United States, however, has also set itself several other goals that are not reducible to achievement or opportunity at an individual level but are important culturally and socially. Public education has traditionally managed diversity and integration, created common standards for the socialization of the next generation, and ensured some equality of opportunity and potential for meritocracy in the society at large. The focus of the charter school debate on achievement—rooted in purely economic rationales of competition and individual opportunism—has ignored these broader concerns.

Individual choice in the market is a key component of neoliberal and “free-market” theory—a freedom many Americans cherish. Therefore, it makes sense that parents might support choice in public schooling. Theoretically, school choice provides them market power to seek the best product for their children, to weigh alternatives, and to make changes in their child’s interest. But this power is only available to informed consumers, so that educational institutions and policies that provide choice may be reinforcing the historical disadvantages faced by racial and ethnic minorities and the poor.

We might expect that students from advantaged class backgrounds whose parents are knowledgeable about educational options would be more likely to enroll in charter schools. White parents might also see charter schools as an educational escape route from integrated public schools that avoids the financial burden of private schooling. On the other hand, the justification for charter schools is often framed in terms of an “educational fix” for poor, minority concentrated districts in urban areas. Here, charter schools may appear to be a better opportunity for aggrieved parents whose children are attending poorly funded, dilapidated public schools.

National research, at first glance, offers encouraging evidence that charter schools are providing choices to those who previously had few options: 52 percent of those enrolled in charter schools are nonwhite compared to 41 percent of those in traditional public schools. These figures, however, tell us little about the local concentrations of whites and nonwhites in charter schools, or how the racial composition and distribution of charter schools compares to the racial composition and distribution of local, traditional public schools.

African-American students attend charter and noncharter schools in about the same proportion, yet a closer look at individual charter schools within districts reveals that they are often segregated. In Florida, for instance, charter schools are 82 percent white, whereas traditional public schools are only 51 percent white. Similar patterns are found across Arizona school districts, where charter school enrollment is 20 percent more white than traditional schools. Amy Stuart Wells’s recent research finds similar tendencies toward segregation among Latinos, who are underrepresented in California’s charter schools. Linda Renzulli and Lorraine Evans’s national analysis of racial composition within districts containing charter schools shows that charter school formation often results in greater levels of segregation in schools between whites and nonwhites. This is not to suggest that minority populations do not make use of charter schools. But, when they do, they do so in segregated contexts.

Historically, racial integration has been a key cause of white flight and it remains a key factor in the racial composition of charter schools and other schools of choice. Decades of research on school segregation have taught us that when public school districts become integrated, through either court mandates or simple population change, white parents may seek alternative schools for their children. Current research suggests that a similar trend exists with charter schools, which provide a public-school option for white flight without the drawbacks of moving (such as job
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changes and longer commutes). While those from less-privileged and minority backgrounds have charter schools at their disposal, the realities of poor urban districts and contemporary patterns of racial residential segregation may mean that the “choice” is between a racially and economically segregated charter school or an equally segregated traditional school, as Renzulli’s research has shown. Individualism in the form of educational choice, although perhaps intuitively appealing, in reality may be magnifying some of the very inequalities that public education has been attempting to overcome since the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954.

Regarding equality of opportunity and its implications for the American ideal of meritocracy, there is also reason for concern. Opponents have pointed to the dilution of district resources where charter schools have emerged, especially as funds are diverted to charter schools. Advocates, in contrast, argue that charter schools have insufficient resources. More research on the funding consequences of charter school creation is clearly warranted. Why, within a system of public education, should some students receive more than others? And what of those left behind, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents may not be aware of their options? Although evidence on the funding question is sparse, research on public schools generally and charter school attendance specifically suggests that U.S. public education may be gravitating again toward a system of separate, but not equal, education.

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Variation across charter schools prevents easy evaluation of their academic success or social consequences for public education. Case studies can point to a good school or a bad one. National studies can provide statistical averages and comparisons, yet they may be unable to reveal the best and worst effects of charter schools. Neither type of research has yet fully accounted for the influence of family background and school demographic composition. Although conclusions about charter school effectiveness or failure remain questionable, the most rigorous national analyses to date suggest that charter schools are doing no better than traditional public schools.

Certainly some charter schools are improving the educational quality and experience of some children. KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools, for example, are doing remarkable things for the students lucky enough to attend them. But for every KIPP school (of which there are only 45, and not all are charter schools), there are many more charter schools that do not provide the same educational opportunity to students, have closed their doors in the middle of the school year, and, in effect, isolate students from their peers of other races and social classes. Does this mean that we should prevent KIPP, for example, from educating students through the charter school option? Maybe. Or perhaps we should develop better program evaluations—of what works and what does not—and implement them as guideposts. To the dismay of some policymakers and “competition” advocates, however, such standardized evaluation and accountability would undercut significant charter school variations if not the very nature of the charter school innovation itself.

Student achievement is only part of the puzzle when it comes to the charter school debate; we need to consider social integration and equality as well. These broader issues, although neglected, warrant as much attention as potential effects on achievement. We suspect that such concerns, although seldom explicit, probably underlie the often contentious charter school and school choice debate itself. We believe it is time to question the logic pertaining to competition, choice, and accountability. Moreover, we should all scrutinize the existing empirical evidence, not to mention educational policy not firmly rooted in empirical reality and research. As Karl Alexander eloquently noted in his presidential address to the Southern Sociological Society, “The charter school movement, with its ‘let 1,000 flowers bloom’ philosophy, is certain to yield an occasional prize-winning rose. But is either of these approaches [to school
choice] likely to prove a reliable guide for broad-based, systemic reform—the kind of reform that will carry the great mass of our children closer to where we want them to be? I hardly think so.” Neither do we.

**FURTHER READINGS**

[Editors’ Note: No references were provided for this article; however, the authors recommend the following for further research into the subject.]


Eight articles examine different models of charter school accountability.


In this early work on school choice, Hening discusses market-oriented choice programs, suggesting they may not work and are likely to make education worse in terms of segregation and outcomes.


Hoxby and Rockoff analyze the achievement of charter school students in Chicago, Illinois, compared to the achievement of students who do not attend charter schools.


The authors compare the math and reading scores of charter school and non–charter school students.


Renzulli and Evans show that integration in public school leads to increased proportions of white students in local charter schools.


Vergari examines charter school politics and policies in eleven states and the province of Alberta to show how charter schools are affecting public education.
Linda Darling-Hammond elaborates on innovative schools, particularly charter schools discussed in the previous article. She brings to this discussion considerable experience working in schools to bring about change for low-income students. This excerpt from her book, *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, illustrates what she has found does and does not work for low-income students in schools. This reading focuses more on the things that work, practices that she and her team of researchers have found to be effective in schools. While she echoes some of the concerns and problems with schools today that Linda Renzulli and Vincent Roscigno discussed in their reading, this one offers some structural and organizational changes that can make any schools more effective for those students who need it the most.

**Questions to consider for this reading:**

1. Does Darling-Hammond believe that charter schools are sufficient in and of themselves to provide the innovation we need in the organization of our schools?

2. What suggestion offered by Darling-Hammond do you think would be most effective in changing the type of education we offer to our children?

3. What factors do you think will inhibit change or make the changes she recommends in the structure of schools less likely to occur?

**Creating Systems of Successful Schools**

Designing schools that serve low-income students of color well is not impossible. Since the groundbreaking research of Ron Edmonds more than 3 decades ago, many studies have documented the practices of unusually effective schools and have uncovered similar features of those that succeed with students who are historically underserved. However, to create such schools on a much wider scale, a new policy environment must be constructed that routinely encourages such schools to be developed and sustained.

**Supporting Successful Innovation**

Creating new schools and innovations is a great American pastime. Waves of reform producing productive new school designs occurred...
at the turn of the 20th century when John Dewey, Ella Flagg Young, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, and others were working in Chicago, New York, and other Northern cities, and African American educators such as Anna Julia Cooper, Lucy Laney, and Mary McLeod Bethune were creating schools in the South. A wave of new school designs swept the country in the 1930s and 1940s when the Progressive Education Association helped redesign and study 30 “experimental” high schools that were found, in the famous Eight-Year Study, to perform substantially better than traditional schools in developing high-achieving, intellectually adventurous, socially responsible young people able to succeed in college and in life.\(^3\) Urban school reform movements occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, producing schools such as the Parkway Program in Philadelphia and Central Park East Elementary in New York, for example; and in the 1990s when the impulse for innovation returned once again.

Despite more successful and more equitable outcomes than most traditional schools, few of these innovative schools were sustained over time. Any educator who has been in the field for any period of time has participated in what former Seattle teacher union leader, Roger Erskine, has dubbed “random acts of innovation”\(^4\) that have come and gone, regardless of their success. Generally, this is because, like bank voles and wolf spiders, urban districts often eat their young. Changes in superintendents and school boards create swings in policies, including efforts to standardize instruction, go “back to the basics,” and bring innovators to heel. Even when they achieve better outcomes, distinctive school models confront long-standing traditions, standard operating procedures, and expectations, including, sometimes, the expectation that the students who have traditionally failed should continue to do so, so that the traditionally advantaged can continue in their position of privilege. Indeed, Anna Julia Cooper’s progressive M Street School in segregated Washington, D.C., which offered a “thinking curriculum” to Black students and outperformed two of the three White high schools in the city, was attacked for both of these reasons in the early 20th century.\(^5\)

Sometimes, successful schools and programs fade because special foundation or government money has dried up, and the district does not have the foresight or wherewithal to preserve what is working. Other times, the challenges of replenishing the capable, dynamic teachers and leaders who have created a successful school prove too great to sustain the model. Historian Lawrence Cremin argued that the successes of progressive education reforms did not spread widely because such practice required “infinitely skilled teachers” who were never prepared in sufficient numbers to sustain these more complex forms of teaching and schooling.\(^6\)

New York City’s unusual renaissance was facilitated by the creation of an innovation silo in the form of the Alternative Schools Superintendency—which buffered schools from many regulations and forged new solutions to old bureaucratic problems, and by a rich array of professional resources in support of reforms, including expert practitioners who created networks of learning and support, a large set of public and private universities offering expertise and intellectual resources, and philanthropists and researchers who provided additional professional and political support to these efforts. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) ran its own Teachers Center, and many of the teachers active in this professional development were involved in the new schools initiatives. Over time, the UFT incorporated many supports for reform-oriented schools into its contracts-first through waivers and later through changes in collective bargaining agreements—and, in some cases, became part of the protection for further reforms. Even when frequent changes in leadership might have led to abandonment of the new schools initiative, these forces kept the reform momentum going.

In most places, however, the lack of investment in professional education that would allow teachers and school leaders to acquire the knowledge they need to undertake sophisticated practices has proved to be an ongoing problem. Another recurring problem is the lack of policy development that could encourage the growth of such
schools rather than keeping them as exceptions, on waiver, and at the margins.

In the current environment, some, including Hill, suggest that charters, contract schools, or performance schools that are essentially licensed by school boards to provide a particular model or approach may provide a way to spark innovation and protect it from the vicissitudes of district politics and changes of course. This strategy has the potential virtue of enabling continuity of educational direction and philosophy within schools—where, arguably, coherence is most important—and holding schools accountable for results, rather than for bureaucratic compliance.

Certainly, some important new school models have been launched through charters. In California, where the state has used chartering as a major lever for innovation, three of the five high schools we studied—Animo, Leadership, and New Tech—were charters. This allowed them to outline a specific approach to education and hold onto it, without being buffeted by changing district views or intruded upon by curriculum, testing, and management mandates. Although collective bargaining agreements from the industrial era often create cumbersome constraints in many districts, new approaches to bargaining have also begun to emerge, and two of these three charters employ unionized teachers.

Many other successful new small school models have been started and expanded through special arrangements for autonomy from district regulations or through charter organizations. Some, like Envision Schools, Asia Society, High Tech High, Uncommon Schools, and others, have introduced substantially new educational approaches, including performance assessments, exhibitions of learning, curriculum focused on global understandings, advisory systems, and more. Odds are that, within many districts, without formal protection, their adventurousness would have been quashed by some school board or superintendent’s insistence on introducing a new standardized curriculum or testing system, or pressuring the schools to grow in size and revert to factory-model designs, or requiring the hiring of teachers or leaders who are not prepared for or bought into the model. (Both district practices of centralized assignment and collective bargaining agreements that require seniority transfers can be culpable in this problem.) Even when there are good intentions to support innovation, local districts are subject to a geological dig of laws, regulations, precedents, and standard operating procedures that can be enormously difficult to untangle before they strangle change efforts.

For these reasons and others, Hill suggests an entirely new role for school districts as managers of a portfolio of relatively autonomous schools, rather than as school operators.

Today, boards oversee a central bureaucracy which owns and operates all the schools in a given district. It is time to retire this “command-and-control” system and replace it with a new model: portfolio management. In this new system, school boards would manage a diverse array of schools, some run by the school district and others by independent organizations, each designed to meet the different needs of students. Like investors with diversified portfolios of stocks and bonds, school boards would closely manage their community’s portfolio of educational service offerings, divesting less productive schools and adding more promising ones. If existing schools do not serve students well, boards would experiment with promising new approaches to find ones that work.

This notion of a portfolio of schools—also advocated by the Gates Foundation—has many potential virtues to recommend it. Certainly, choice is better than coercion in the management of education. Students and families could find better fits with their interests and philosophies, and make a greater commitment to schools they have chosen. Choice could make schools more accountable and attentive to student needs. Schools that create successful designs should benefit from more autonomy to refine and maintain their good work. If a portfolio strategy works well it should “ensure a supply of quality school options that reflects a community’s needs, interests, and assets . . . and [ensure] that every student has access to high-quality schools that prepare them for further learning, work, and citizenship.”
A portfolio structure is essentially what has emerged in New York City within the regular district structure (now divided into sets of school zones and networks) and, on a smaller scale, in Boston, which has launched a set of Pilot Schools—alternatives that provide a variety of educational options sharing the features described earlier in this chapter, which are succeeding at rates far above those of many other schools serving similar students.9

However, neither choice nor charters alone is a panacea. And not all innovations are useful ones. Although some public schools of choice have been successful, others have made little difference. For example, a recent evaluation of Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 initiative, which replaced a group of low-performing schools with charters and other autonomous schools of choice run by entrepreneurs and the district, found that the achievement of students in the new schools was no different from that of a matched comparison group of students in the old schools they had left, and both groups continued to be very low-performing.10

Results for charters nationally have also been mixed. Reviews of the evidence have found positive impacts in some places and insignificant or negative impacts in others.11 A study of 16 states, covering 70% of all charter schools, found that only 17% of charters produced academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools serving demographically similar students, while 37% performed worse than their traditional public school counterparts, and 46% showed no difference from district-run public schools. The fact that outcomes differ across states suggests that different approaches to regulation and funding may be important. For example, in Ohio, where an unregulated market strategy created a huge range of for-profit and nonprofit providers with few public safeguards, charter school students were found to achieve at consistently lower levels than their demographically similar public school counterparts. Studies have also found lower average performance for charter students in the poorly regulated charter sectors in Washington, D.C., and Arizona, where charters can be granted for 15 years and fewer safeguards for students are required.12 . . .

The pressures under recent accountability regimes to get test scores up have led to growing concerns that some new schools—charters and otherwise—have sought to exclude those students who are the most challenging to teach, either by structuring admissions so that low-achieving students and those with special education or other needs are unlikely to be admitted, or by creating conditions under which such students are encouraged to leave. Studies of new schools created in New York City after 2000, for example, have found that these schools, unlike the earlier pioneers, enrolled more academically able students and fewer English language learners or students with disabilities than the large comprehensive schools they replaced. This enabled them to show better outcomes.13

Thus, it is not the governance mechanism or the degree of autonomy alone that determines whether schools will succeed. In places where new school models and redesigned schools have done well without ignoring or pushing out struggling students, attention has been paid both to sparking new educational possibilities and building schools’ capacities for good instruction, and to removing unnecessary constraints and creating appropriate safeguards for students.

Sustaining Change

The goal, ultimately, is not just to support a vanguard group of unique schools, but to enable all schools to adopt practices that will be more successful for all of their students. For this to happen, districts must find ways to foster innovation and responsiveness without compromising equity, access, and the public purpose of schools to prepare citizens who can live, work, and contribute to a common democratic society. This will require redesigning districts as well as schools, rethinking regulations and collective bargaining, while building capacity and allocating resources in smarter and more equitable ways.
Redesigning Districts. For successful schools to become the norm, districts must move beyond the pursuit of an array of ad hoc initiatives managed by exception to fundamental changes in district operations and policy. Throughout the 20th century most urban districts adopted increasingly bureaucratic approaches to managing schools. They created extensive rules to manage every aspect of school life—from, curriculum, instruction, and testing to hiring, purchasing, and facilities—along with complex, departmentalized structures to manage these rules and procedures. Siloed bureaucrats have had the mission of administering procedures that often get in the way of practitioners’ instructional efforts, rather than managing quality by being accountable for figuring out ways to support success. To create a new paradigm, the role of the district must shift

- From enforcing procedures to building school capacity
- From managing compliance to managing improvement
- From rewarding staff for following orders and “doing things right” to rewarding staff for getting results by “doing the right things”
- From rationing educational opportunities to expanding successful programs
- From ignoring (and compounding) failure in schools serving the least powerful to reallocating resources to ensure their success

To a large extent, these changes represent a switch from bureaucratic accountability—that is, hierarchical systems that pass down decisions and hold employees accountable for following the rules, whether or not they are effective—to professional accountability—that is, knowledge-based systems that help build capacity in schools for doing the work well, and hold people accountable for using professional practices that enable student success.

In a new paradigm, the design of the district office should also evolve from a set of silos that rarely interact with one another to a team structure that can integrate efforts across areas such as personnel, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and evaluation, with the goal of creating greater capacity in a more integrated fashion. These supports should include

- Recruiting a pool of well-prepared teachers and leaders from which schools can choose—and building pipelines to facilitate their training and availability
- Organizing access to high-quality, sustained professional development and resources, including skilled instructional mentors and coaches that schools can call upon and that can be deployed to diagnose problems and support improvements in schools that are struggling
- Ensuring that high-quality instructional resources—curriculum materials, books, computers, and texts—are available
- Providing services, such as purchasing and facilities maintenance, to school consumers in effective and efficient ways—if schools choose to acquire them from the district

If they incorporate choice, districts will need to ensure that all schools are worth choosing and that all students have access to good schools. This means they must continuously evaluate how schools are doing, seeking to learn from successful schools and to support improvements in struggling schools by ensuring that these schools secure strong leadership and excellent teachers, and are supported in adopting successful program strategies. Districts will need to become learning organizations themselves—developing their capacity to investigate and learn from innovations in order to leverage productive strategies, and developing their capacity to support successful change. Where good schools and programs are oversubscribed, districts will have to learn how to spread good models rather than rationing them, and where schools are failing, they will need to learn how to diagnose, address problems, and invest resources to improve them. These capacities are needed in all systems, whether or not they adopt choice strategies.

If education is to serve the public good, it is critical to guard against the emergence of a privatized system in which schools are separated
by their ability to choose their students, rather than by the ability of students and families to choose their schools. For choice to work, districts must also not only provide information and transportation to parents; they must also manage parents’ and schools’ choices so that schools recruit and admit students without regard to race, class, or prior academic achievement, both to preserve the possibilities for integrated, common schools and to ensure that some schools do not become enclaves of privilege while others remain dumping grounds. Managed choice arrangements in cities such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, and (in some eras) New York City have created strategies for doing this, allowing parents to state several preferences and requiring schools to admit a diverse student body from all parts of the achievement range. However, these districts have also learned that such strategies require constant vigilance and are not by themselves enough to guarantee access to quality schools for all students. In particular, without the right support and incentives, many schools will seek to recruit the most advantaged students and deflect or push out the least advantaged ones. These incentives, as I discuss below, have to do with the level of capacity to serve students well, with resources, and with accountability measures.

**Building Professional Capacity.** Building professional capacity ultimately requires investments in effective preparation, hiring, mentoring, evaluation, and professional development for school leaders, as well as teachers and other staff. In addition, systems need to develop strategies for sharing good practice across schools, ranging from research that is widely disseminated to the establishment of networks of schools, teachers, and principals that develop and share practice with one another, to the creation of strategies such as school quality reviews that allow educators to examine one another’s practice and get feedback that can help them grow.

Growing successful new schools or improving existing ones is not likely to be accomplished merely by a replication strategy in which external agents seek to transplant programs or designs from one school into another. Replication efforts have an inglorious history, largely because they quickly run up against differences in staff knowledge and capacity resources, and contexts of receiving schools. Unless they are accompanied by intensive, long-term professional development support, schools can rarely attend to the nuances and implications of new strategies in ways that would permit strong implementation over the long run. When the purportedly effective techniques don’t work immediately, especially for students who are challenging to teach, staff will tend to revert to old approaches and/or focus on reaching those who are easiest to teach given what teachers already know how to do and have the resources to support.

Another approach was used to achieve the surprisingly consistent and sophisticated practices we found across the Coalition Campus Schools we studied, which allowed them to be successful with normally low-achieving students. Following what might be called a birthing and parenting strategy, many of the new school “launchers” had been teachers in the older, successful schools. They were mentored by expert veteran principals and teachers while belonging to a set of networks that facilitated ongoing sharing of practice and supported problem solving.

Networking strategies have increasingly been found to be powerful for sharing practitioner knowledge. Teacher-to-teacher networks such as the National Writing Project help teachers develop effective pedagogical practices; principal networks have become critically important within many districts seeking to support stronger instructional leadership and create opportunities for shared problem solving; and, in both the United States and abroad, school networks are enabling educators to share departmental and schoolwide practices through collective professional development, observational visits, and pooling of intellectual resources.

**Managing and Allocating Resources.** For schools to succeed with all students, they also must be adequately resourced to do so. As we have seen,
disparities in funding between states, districts, and schools often leave those working with the neediest students with the fewest resources. States can begin to change this by costing out what would be required to provide an adequate education to graduate all students, having met the state standards, and then allocating resources equitably to each student on a per pupil basis adjusted for regional cost-of-living differentials and pupil needs. The weighted student formula approach, advocated by many school finance reformers and adopted in some cities to equalize within-district funding, is intended to provide an added increment for students with disabilities, new English language learners, and low-income students, determined by estimating the costs of educating these students to the state’s standards. Schools serving large concentrations of high-need students would receive additional funds to provide the services that so many of their students require.

Schools and districts also need the flexibility to spend their funds in optimal ways. Among the distinctive features of successful, redesigned schools is the fact that they use the resources of people and time very differently from traditional systems in order to provide more intense relationships between adults and students and to ensure collaborative planning and learning time for teachers, as schools in other nations do. [T]he United States spends much less of its educational budget on classroom instruction and on teachers—just over 50%, as compared to 70 to 80% in other countries. This weakens instruction.

In part, this is because the United States spends more on several layers of bureaucracy between the state and the school, made necessary in part by the dizzying array of federal and state categorical programs schools are expected to manage because they are not trusted to make good decisions about resources. These categorical programs themselves create inefficiencies in spending, requiring administrative attention and audit trails, as well as fragmenting programs and efforts in schools in ways that undermine educational outcomes. Often, these programs and other regulations prescribe staffing patterns and other uses of resources that reduce focus and effectiveness.

In addition, the United States spends more of its personnel budget on a variety of administrative staff and instructional aides rather than on teachers directly, implementing the outdated model that added a variety of pull-out programs and peripheral services to make up for the failures of a factory-model system, rather than investing in the instructional core of expert teachers given time to work productively with students whom they know well. Thus, whereas full-time teachers engaged in instruction comprise about 70 to 80% of education employees in most Asian and European nations, they are only about half of education employees in the United States. In 2003, for example, whereas only 51% of school district employees in the United States were classroom teachers, the proportion of full-time classroom teachers in Japanese schools was 89% of all educational staff. The proportion is 72% of all employees, if one also includes the large number of doctors, dentists, and pharmacists who are based in Japanese schools. Indeed, Japanese schools had, proportionately, as many doctors as there were instructional aides in U.S. schools, but only one-third the proportion of administrative staff.

Successful, redesigned schools often invest more of their resources in classroom teachers and organize teachers in teams that share students over longer periods of time, to create more sharing of knowledge, as well as to focus on accountability for student needs and success. They consolidate their resources to offer a strong, common core curriculum and key supports, resisting the temptation to diffuse their energies or spend on peripherals at the expense of the central goals of the school. The implications for staffing patterns, resource allocations, and the uses of teachers’ and students’ time are even more distinctive for schools that engage students in extended internships outside the school, as the Met and its network of schools do; for schools that are engaging students in a range of college courses while they are in high school; and for schools that are embracing
technology-based approaches to project work as the New Tech network of schools does.

States and districts will need to encourage more thoughtful and inventive uses of resources by resisting the temptation to prescribe old factory-model requirements for staffing and uses of time and funds, and by providing supports for school leaders to learn how to design organizations that use resources in ways that are likely to produce the desired outcomes.

Deregulating Strategically. As I have suggested, a challenge in scaling up more effective school designs is that the century-old model of school organization that has shaped most schools is now reinforced by layers of regulations that often do not produce the most effective forms of education. Most state regulatory frameworks for schools have not yet shifted to accommodate or encourage the design choices made by new school models.

Where innovations are made possible by relief from regulations, they cannot spread unless the same regulatory relief is applied to other parts of the system. Few states have examined ways to deregulate public schools strategically in ways that would permit greater focus and success while preserving core public values. In recent years, as charters and other relatively autonomous schools have been created to permit flexibility in one part of the system, heavy-handed regulation has often increased in the remainder of the system.

The Boston Pilot Schools and the New York City alternative schools are proof that large public organizations can create organizational firewalls that allow space for successful innovation. But to do so, they must always be conscious of the impact of their policies on school-level practice, and they must, over time, allow innovators to help change the rules as well as avoid them. Regulations protecting access and providing equitable allocations of resources should provide the foundation of a redesigned system, while professional standards and investments in professional capacity that allow educators to be trusted should replace efforts to micromanage teaching and the design of schools.

Changing Contracts. Over time, many of the features of the factory model have been incorporated into collective bargaining agreements by both unions and school boards. Among the most problematic aspects for school reforms are constraints on how time and work are structured and procedures for faculty hiring and assignment that have assumed, in the assembly-line era, that teachers are interchangeable parts.

The success of schools committed to a set of educational principles depends on their ability to hire faculty who believe in those principles and have the capacity to enact them. Thus, centralized assignments of teachers can be a problem, whether in the initial hiring of teachers or due to seniority transfers that give teachers rights to transfer into schools where their skills and philosophy may not fit. Some districts have begun to change these traditions by taking on the responsibility to build a strong pool of well-prepared personnel from which schools can then recruit, and by placing teachers who want to transfer schools into this pool when openings are available, with rights to an early interview but not to placement in a specific school.

In New York, for example, the new school development process triggered important system reforms, including in the key area of selecting teachers. With the cooperation of the Board of Education, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the CCS Project negotiated a process for selecting staff in which a committee of teachers reviews resumes, interviews prospective candidates—and often observes them teaching or planning collaboratively—and selects those most qualified for the available positions. Where teachers are equally qualified, seniority is the decisive variable. UFT representatives participated in these hiring committees, and were so pleased with the outcomes that the union introduced the process into contract negotiations and recommended its adoption more broadly. The contract now includes a peer selection process for teachers in all nontraditional schools, illustrating how innovation can be used as a lever to transform system policies.
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In addition, in any New York school where 55% of teachers vote to do so, the school can trigger a School-Based Option that relieves it from many contract constraints and allows new arrangements to be substituted. Many innovative schools have created their own contracts for teachers which, for example, may recognize teachers’ roles as advisors and acknowledge different uses of time during the day and week in return for smaller pupil loads and greater autonomy.

Rethinking Accountability. Finally, policymakers must learn new ways to manage the tension between fostering innovation and holding schools accountable to the other purposes of public education—equity, access, development of citizenship, and progress in learning. One critical aspect of the state’s role is to ascertain that students are being adequately taught to become productive citizens of society. In recent years, accountability in the United States has largely come to mean tracking test scores on increasingly limited measures, rather than ensuring access to adequate and equitable learning opportunities and the achievement of a broader set of outcomes. As we have seen, the allocation of sanctions to schools based on these high-stakes measures also creates disincentives for schools to admit and keep the neediest students.

Some states, such as Nebraska and Rhode Island, have allowed schools to develop and implement broader, more ambitious assessments of student learning that are approved by the state and examined for accountability purposes along with other documented student outcomes. In New York, 31 schools in the Performance Standards Consortium, including many of those we studied, have developed their own graduation portfolio of challenging research papers and exhibitions. This collection of required products treats both academic outcomes and civic and social responsibility—the latter demonstrated through community service and contributions to the school—and is approved for use in lieu of some of the New York State Regents examinations, with the expectation that schools also track evidence of college admission and completion.

In the long run, accountability systems that provide the right incentives for school quality and equity will need to examine student growth and school progress on a range of high-quality measures, not just their status at a moment in time on one limited measure, include evidence of students’ opportunities to learn as well as their outcomes, and enforce professional standards of practice that assure parents their children will be well taught, not just well tested.

CONCLUSION

A growing number of schools have disrupted the status quo by providing opportunities for low-income students of color to become critical thinkers and leaders for the future. Unless policy systems change, however, these schools will remain anomalies, rather than harbingers of the future. Creating a system that supports the learning of all students is not impossible. It will take clarity of vision and purposeful, consistent action to create a web of supportive, mutually reinforcing elements. In particular, dismantling the institutionalized inequities that feed the racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic achievement gap will require substantive policy changes in redesigning schools, developing teachers and principals, expanding our conceptions of curriculum and assessment, rethinking funding strategies, and reconceptualizing accountability.

NOTES

2. For a review; see Levine & Lezotte (1990).
3. Eight-year study.
16. Japanese statistics are for elementary and lower secondary schools, as reported in Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2004); U.S. statistics are from National Center for Education Statistics (2005), Table 79.

REFERENCES


THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

A Broader Picture

Richard Rothstein

Richard Rothstein presents a very complicated picture of the factors that lead to student achievement in schools. The problems he describes in this reading are problems of poverty that children bring with them to school and that influence their abilities to learn. As such, the recommendations he makes in this reading go far beyond reforming schools and classrooms and link schools with the community to solve broader issues in society.

Questions to consider for this reading:
1. How does poverty shape children’s ability to perform in classrooms?
2. Is it possible to solve issues related to children’s health by only providing better health care?
3. What one thing would you change to enhance the learning environment for students living in poverty?

The large achievement gap between white and minority students is generally viewed as a failure of the U.S. education system. Policymakers almost universally conclude that this gap must result from ineffective school policy and practice: low expectations, unqualified teachers, badly designed curriculum, large classes, undisciplined school climates, unfocused leadership, or a combination of these.

Many well-intentioned people blame the achievement gap on “failing schools” because common sense tells them that it could not be otherwise. The amount of money a family has—or the color of a child’s skin—should not determine how well that child learns to read. If teachers know how to teach and schools permit no distractions, all students should be able to learn.

This commonsense perspective, however, is misleading. For although income and skin pigment don’t directly cause low achievement, the characteristics that in general define social-class differences inevitably influence learning. Here are some examples.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES

Parents from different social classes often have different child rearing habits, disciplinary philosophies, ways of communicating expectations, and even styles of reading to children. These differences do not hold true in every family, but they influence the average tendencies of families from different classes.
Social-class patterns in child rearing make sense when you think about them. If upper-middle-class parents have jobs in which they collaborate with fellow employees and resolve problems, they are more likely to show their young children how to figure out answers for themselves. Parents whose jobs require them to follow routines are less likely to encourage creative problem solving in their children. Therefore, youngsters raised by parents who are professionals will generally have a more inquisitive, active approach to learning than will youngsters raised by working-class parents.

Thirty-five years ago, Kohn (1969) found that parents whose occupations required creativity and decision making were less likely to punish their children for actions in which the children’s intentions were desirable, even if matters did not work out as intended. Parents who were closely supervised at work were more likely to base punishment on their children’s actions, regardless of the children’s intentions.

More recently, two researchers visited homes of families from different social classes to record conversations between parents and toddlers (Hart & Risley, 1995). On average, professional parents spoke more than 2,000 words per hour to their children, working-class parents spoke about 1,300, and welfare mothers spoke about 600. At 4 years old, children of professionals had vocabularies that were nearly 50 percent larger than those of working-class children and twice as large as those of welfare children.

The researchers also tracked how often parents verbally encouraged or reprimanded their children. Toddlers of professionals received an average of six encouragements per reprimand. Working-class children got two. For welfare children, the ratio was reversed: They received an average of one encouragement for every two scoldings. It seems reasonable to expect that when these children eventually go to school, their teachers will not be able to fully offset such differences in early interactions. Students whose parents have encouraged initiative from an early age are more likely to take responsibility for their own learning.

**Health Needs**

Many social and economic manifestations of social class also have implications for learning. Among these are differences in health.

For example, vision problems have an obvious effect on school success. Poor children have twice the average rate of severe vision impairment (Starfield, 1997). One reason for this higher rate of vision problems may be inadequate prenatal development resulting from mothers’ poor medical care and nutrition. Visual deficits may also arise because low-income children are more likely to watch too much television, an activity that does not develop hand-eye coordination and depth perception. Forty-two percent of black 4th graders watch six hours or more of television a day, compared with 13 percent of white 4th graders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003, table 117).

Typical vision screening in school only asks students to read charts for nearsightedness. Most students are never tested for farsightedness or for difficulty with tracking, problems that are most likely to affect academic performance. Even when testing leads to optometric referrals, low-income children are less likely to follow up. When they get prescriptions for lenses, they less frequently obtain them or wear them to school (Gould & Gould, 2003).

Vision problems make it difficult to read from a book or see the chalkboard. The disproportionate assignment of low-income black students to special education may partly reflect a failure to correct their vision. When students have puzzling difficulties learning to read, the explanation is often no more complex than their inability to see well.

Differences in dental care have a similar impact: Untreated cavities are nearly three times as prevalent among poor children as among middle-class children (U.S. General Accounting Office [U.S. GAO], 2000, Figure 1). Students with toothaches, even minor ones, will tend to pay less attention in class and to be more distracted during tests than will students with healthy teeth.
Low-income children have dangerously high blood lead levels—at five times the rate of middle-class children’s—diminishing their cognitive ability (U.S. GAO, 1999). Although lead-based paint was banned from residential construction in 1978, low-income children more often live in buildings constructed prior to that date and in buildings that are not repainted often enough to prevent old layers of paint from flaking.

Low-income children, particularly those who live in densely populated city neighborhoods, are also more likely to contract asthma. The asthma rate is substantially higher for urban than for rural children, for those on welfare than for nonwelfare families, for children from single-parent families than for those from two-parent families, and for poor than for non-poor families (Forrest, Starfield, Riley, & Kang, 1997). The disease is provoked in part by breathing fumes from the low-grade heating oil often used in low-income housing and from diesel trucks and buses. Excessive dust and allergic reactions to mold, cockroaches, and secondhand smoke also provoke it.

Asthma keeps children up at night; even if they make it to school the next day, they are likely to be tired and inattentive. Many children with asthma refrain from exercise and so are less physically fit. Drowsy and more irritable, they also have more behavioral problems. Middle-class children typically get treatment for asthma symptoms; low-income children often do not. Lower-class children with asthma are about 80 percent more likely than middle-class children with asthma to miss more than seven days of school a year because of the disease (Halfon & Newacheck, 1993).

Children without regular medical care are also more likely to contract other illnesses—some serious, others minor—that keep them out of school. Despite federal programs that make medical care available to low-income children, gaps between access and use remain. Many families do not enroll in such programs because they don’t know of the programs’ availability, are intimidated by the process, or are unaware of the importance of medical care. Even when enrolled, they are less likely to use the services to which they are entitled.

**Mobility Rates**

The growing shortage of affordable, adequate housing for low-income families also affects achievement. Urban rents have risen faster than working-class incomes have, forcing many families to move frequently because they fall behind in rent payments. Family breakups and bouts of unemployment also contribute to low-income children’s high mobility rates. In some schools in minority neighborhoods, mobility rates are above 100 percent. For every seat in the school, two children were enrolled at some time during the year (Bruno & Isken, 1996; Kerbow, 1996).

A 1994 report found that 30 percent of the poorest students had attended at least three different schools by 3rd grade, whereas only 10 percent of middle-class students had done so. Black students were more than twice as likely as white students to change schools this often (U.S. GAO, [1994]). High mobility depresses achievement not only for the students who move—each move means readjusting to teachers, classmates, and curriculum—but also for other students in high-mobility schools. Teachers with ever-changing classrooms are more likely to review old material than introduce new material, and they are less able to adjust instruction to the individual needs of students they barely know.

**Financial Assets**

Differences in long-term economic security are also important predictors of student achievement. Most analysts overlook these differences and use only annual income to indicate economic status. But when we recognize that black families who earned a low income in one specific year are likely to have been poor for longer than white families who earned a similar income that year, it helps explain why black students, on
average, score lower than white students with the same family incomes.

White families are also likely to own more assets that support children’s achievement than are black families at the same current income level. Median black family income is now about 64 percent of median white family income, but black family net worth is only 12 percent of white family net worth (Mishel, Bernstein, & Boushey, 2003, tables 1.4, 4.6). So white middle-class families are more likely than black middle-class families to have adequate and spacious housing, even when their annual incomes are similar, not only because whites suffer no discrimination in real estate markets but also because white middle-class parents are more likely to have received capital contributions from their own parents—for a down payment on a first home, for example. Black middle-class parents are more likely to be the first generation in their families to have middle-class status, and their own parents are less likely to have been able to help financially. As with all these examples, not all middle-class whites get first-time down payments from their own parents—and for a down payment on a first home, for example. Black middle-class parents are more likely to be the first generation in their families to have middle-class status, and their own parents are less likely to have been able to help financially. As with all these examples, not all middle-class whites can expect the same level of financial support from their parents. But on average, more whites than blacks with similar incomes benefit from this practice, and this contributes to average differences in neighborhood resources and in housing quality that add to the test score gap.

Asset differences also influence how much families save for college educations. A student’s awareness that his or her family has resources for college can influence whether or not that student believes that college attendance is within reach. Comparing black and white middle-class students whose families have similar current incomes, it would be reasonable to expect the white students to be more confident about affording college and thus more dedicated to working hard in school.

**Making Progress**

To make significant progress in narrowing the achievement gap, we must pursue three tracks simultaneously.

Certainly, schools need to raise the quality of instruction. Better schools are important, and better school practices can probably narrow the gap. School reform, however, is not enough.

We must also invest resources to expand the definition of schooling to include crucial out-of-school hours in which families and communities are now the sole—and disparate— influences. Because the gap is already huge among 3-year-olds, this investment should probably concentrate initially on early childhood programs for infants and toddlers that provide the kind of intellectual environment that middle-class children typically experience. This goal probably requires professional caregivers and low child-adult ratios.

Another essential out-of-school focus is giving low-income students after-school and summer experiences similar to those that most middle-class students take for granted. These experiences should not consist only of remedial programs that provide added drill in math and reading. The advantage that middle-class children gain after school and in the summer comes mostly from the self-confidence they acquire and the awareness they develop of the world outside their homes and immediate communities as they participate in organized athletics, dance, drama, museum visits, recreational reading, and other activities that develop their inquisitiveness, creativity, self-discipline, and organizational skills. After-school and summer programs will narrow the achievement gap only if they duplicate such enriched experiences.

Finally, the federal and state governments need to develop social and economic policies that enable children to attend school more equally ready to learn. These policies include offering health services for low-income children and families, providing stable housing for working families with children, taking aggressive action against discrimination, and boosting the incomes of working parents employed in low-wage occupations.

Although many characteristics of social class are impervious to short-term change, many others would respond to achievable policy reforms. For example, establishing optometric clinics in schools to improve the vision of low-income
students may raise their test scores more than spending the same money on instructional improvement. Likewise, schools could provide dental clinics at a cost that is comparable to what schools typically spend on less effective reforms. If the United States truly intends to raise the achievement of low-income students, however, we need to make a more expansive commitment and provide a full array of health services. We should also evaluate whether increasing low-income families’ access to stable housing raises student achievement.

To date, there have been few experiments to test the relative benefits of these alternative strategies, partly because people are so wedded to the notion that school reform alone is sufficient. But we could easily design experiments of this sort, and we should make them a priority.

For nearly half a century, economists, sociologists, and educators have been aware of the association of social and economic disadvantage with student achievement gaps. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding: Raising the achievement of low-income children requires ameliorating the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just reforming schools.

REFERENCES


In this excerpt from a larger piece, Michael W. Apple, a well-respected critical theorist, examines the attempts at equality from a political framework. This excerpt, which is solidly based in critical theory, examines both the politics of educational reform and the motivations driving conservative social movements in education. He looks at what makes these movements successful and suggests that liberals should consider such strategies in their attempts to change the educational process. This piece moves the issue of equality and equity in education to a new level, far outside the schools, to that of the politics of education.

Questions to consider for this reading:
1. Are politics important in deciding what happens in classrooms? If so, why?
2. According to Apple, why has the Right been successful in mobilizing people, even when participation is against their better interests?
3. What strategy for educational reforms is Apple suggesting as an alternative to the agenda for political reform put forth by conservative groups?

When a nation and its government and major institutions do not deliver on their promises and on the sets of values they officially profess in education and elsewhere, then substantive criticism is the ultimate act of patriotism. Such criticism says that “We are not just passing through. This is our country and our institutions as well, built by the labor of millions of people such as ourselves. We take the values in our founding documents seriously and demand that you do so too.”

Of course, the arguments [I am] making in this article are quite political. But that is the point. Over the past three decades, many committed and critical educators have argued that education must be seen as a political act. They have suggested that in order to do this, we need to think relationally. That is, understanding education requires that we situate it back into both the unequal relations of power in the larger society and into the relations of dominance and subordination—and the conflicts to change these things—that are generated by these relations. Thus, rather than simply asking whether students have mastered a particular subject matter and have done well on our all too common tests, we should ask a different set of questions: Whose knowledge is this? How did it become “official”? What is the relationship between this knowledge and who has cultural, social and economic capital in this society? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge and who does not? What can we do as critical educators and activists to change existing educational and social inequalities and to create

curricula and teaching that are more socially just (Apple, 1996, 2000; Apple & Beane, 2007)?

These are complicated questions and they often require complicated answers. However, there is now a long tradition of asking and answering these kinds of critical challenges to the ways education is currently being carried on, a tradition that has grown considerably since the time when I first raised these issues in *Ideology and Curriculum* (Apple, 1979; see also the more recent 3rd ed., Apple, 2004). Perhaps the best way of documenting why we need to keep these political issues at the forefront of our vision of what schools now do and what they should do is to focus on the life of a student, someone I knew very well. I hope that you will forgive me if at times throughout this article I use personal narratives to make larger points. But it seems to me that sometimes such a writing style can bring home points in ways that more abstract ways of presenting things cannot. Such a style also makes the politics of education not something “out there” in some abstract universe very far away, but puts it “right here” in terms of our personal choices inside and outside of education.

**REMEMBERING REAL SCHOOLS AND REAL CHILDREN**

Joseph sobbed at my desk. He was a tough kid, a hard case, someone who often made life difficult for his teachers. He was all of nine-years-old and here he was sobbing, holding on to me in public. He had been in my fourth-grade class all year, a classroom situated in a decaying building in an east coast city that was among the most impoverished in the nation. There were times when I wondered, seriously, whether I would make it through that year. There were many Josephs in that classroom and I was constantly drained by the demands, the bureaucratic rules, the daily lessons that bounced off of the kids’ armor. Yet somehow it was satisfying, compelling and important, even though the prescribed curriculum and the textbooks that were meant to teach it were often beside the point. They were boring to the kids and boring to me.

I should have realized the first day what it would be like when I opened that city’s “Getting Started” suggested lessons for the first few days and it began with the suggestion that “as a new teacher” I should circle the students’ desks and have them introduce each other and tell something about themselves. It’s not that I was against this activity; it’s just that I didn’t have enough unbroken desks (or even chairs) for all of the students. A number of the kids had nowhere to sit. This was my first lesson—but certainly not my last—in understanding that the curriculum and those who planned it lived in an unreal world, a world fundamentally disconnected from my life with those children in that inner city classroom.

But here’s Joseph. He’s still crying. I’ve worked extremely hard with him all year long. We’ve eaten lunch together; we’ve read stories; we’ve gotten to know each other. There are times when he drives me to despair and other times when I find him to be among the most sensitive children in my class. I just can’t give up on this kid. He’s just received his report card and it says that he is to repeat fourth grade. The school system has a policy that states that failure in any two subjects (including the “behavior” side of the report card) requires that the student be left back. Joseph was failing “gym” and arithmetic. Even though he had shown improvement, he had trouble keeping awake during arithmetic, had done poorly on the mandatory city-wide tests, and hated gym. One of his parents worked a late shift and Joseph would often stay up, hoping to spend some time with her. And the things that students were asked to do in gym were, to him, “lame.”

The thing is, he had made real progress during the year. But I was instructed to keep him back. I knew that things would be worse next year. There would still not be enough desks. The poverty in that community would still be horrible; and health care and sufficient funding for job training and other services would be diminished. I knew that the jobs that were available in this
former mill town paid deplorable wages and that even with both of his parents working for pay, Joseph’s family income was simply insufficient. I also knew that, given all that I already had to do each day in that classroom and each night at home in preparation for the next day, it would be nearly impossible for me to work any harder than I had already done with Joseph. And there were another five children in that class whom I was supposed to leave back.

So Joseph sobbed. Both he and I understood what this meant. There would be no additional help for me—or for children such as Joseph—next year. The promises would remain simply rhetorical. Words would be thrown at the problems. Teachers and parents and children would be blamed. But the school system would look like it believed in and enforced higher standards. The structuring of economic and political power in that community and that state would again go on as “business as usual.”

The next year Joseph basically stopped trying. The last time I heard anything about him was that he was in prison.

This story is not apocryphal. While the incident took place a while ago, the conditions in that community and that school are much worse today. And the intense pressure that teachers, administrators, and local communities are under is also considerably worse (Kozol, 1991; Lipman, 2004). It reminds me of why large numbers of thoughtful educators and activists mistrust the incessant focus on standards, increased testing, marketization and vouchers, and other kinds of educational “reforms” which may sound good in the abstract, but which often work in exactly the opposite ways when they reach the level of the classroom (see Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 2005). It is exactly this sensibility of the contradictions between proposals for reform and the realities and complexities of education on the ground that provides one of the major reasons so many of us are asking the questions surrounding how education can make a more serious contribution to social justice. I want to say more about this in the next section of this article.

THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Critical educators have long demonstrated that policies often have strikingly unforeseen consequences. Reforms that are instituted with good intentions may have hidden effects that are more than a little problematic. We have shown for instance that the effects of some of the favorite reforms of neo-liberals and neo-conservatives, for instance—voucher plans, national or state-wide curricula, and national or state-wide testing can serve as examples—quite often reproduce or even worsen inequalities. Thus, we should be very cautious about accepting what may seem to be meritorious intentions at face value. Intentions are too often contradicted by how reforms may function in practice. This is true not only for large scale transformations of educational policies and governance, but also about moves to change the ways curriculum and teaching go on in schools.

The framework politically and educationally progressive educators have employed to understand this is grounded in what in cultural theory is called the act of repositioning. It in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power. Speaking personally, growing up poor myself made this almost a “natural” perspective for me to take. That is, every institution, policy, and practice—and especially those that now dominate education and the larger society—establish relations of power in which some voices are heard and some are not. While it is not preordained that those voices that will be heard most clearly are also those who have the most economic, cultural and social capital, it is most likely that this will be the case. After all, we do not exist on a level playing field. Many economic, social and educational policies when actually put in place tend to benefit those who already have advantages.

These points may seem overly rhetorical and too abstract, but unfortunately there is no small amount of truth in them. For example, in a time
when all too much of the discourse around educational reform is focused on vouchers and choice plans on the one hand and on proposals for national or state curricula, standards, and testing on the other, as I have shown in a number of volumes (Apple, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2006, [2009a]; Apple et al., 2003), there is a good deal of international evidence now that such policies may actually reproduce or even worsen class, gender and race inequalities. Thus, existing structures of economic and cultural power often lead to a situation in which what may have started out in some educators’ or legislators’ minds as an attempt to make things better, in the end is all too usually transformed into another set of mechanisms for social stratification.

While much of this is due to the ways in which race, gender, class and “ability” act as structural realities in this society and to how we fund (and do not fund) schools, some of it is related to the hesitancy of policy makers to take seriously enough the complicated ways in which education is itself a political act. These very politics and the structurally generated inequalities that stand behind them provide much of the substance underpinning the organizational principles of my work.

A key word in my discussion above is *reform*. This concept is what might be called a “sliding signifier.” That is, it has no essential meaning and, like a glass, can be filled with multiple things. As Wittgenstein (1953) reminded us, it is always wise not to accept the meaning of a concept at face value. Instead, one must contextualize it. The meaning is in its *use*. Let us look at this in a bit more detail.

The language of educational reform is always interesting. It consistently paints a picture that what is going on in schools now needs fixing, is outmoded, inefficient or simply “bad.” Reforms will fix it. They will make things “better.” Over the past decades certain language systems in particular have been mobilized. Not only will specific reforms make things better, they will make schools more democratic. Of course, the word democracy is one of the best examples of a sliding signifier. It carries with it an entire history of conflicts over its very meaning (Foner, 1998). Like reform, democracy does not carry an essential meaning emblazoned on its head so to speak. Instead it is one of the most contested words in the English language. Indeed, one of the major tactics of dominant groups historically and currently is to cement particular meanings of democracy into public discourse. Thus, under current neo-liberal policies in education and elsewhere, there are consistent attempts to redefine democracy as simply consumer choice. Here democracy is not a collective project of building and rebuilding our public institutions. It becomes simply a matter of placing everything that was once public onto a market. Collective justice will somehow take care of itself as the market works its wonders.

As Mary Lee Smith and her colleagues have recently demonstrated in their powerful analysis of a number of educational reforms, the nice sounding and “democratic” language used to promote reforms is often totally at odds with the actual functioning of these reforms in real schools in real communities (Smith, 2004). A significant number of things that were advertised (and that is often the appropriate word) as making schools more responsive and “better” (increased testing and parental choice through marketization may serve as examples) may have exacerbated problems of inequality. (Think of Joseph and what happened to him in an earlier round of increased testing and “raising standards.”)

One of the reasons this is the case is because the formation of a good deal of educational policy is actually a form of “symbolic politics,” basically a kind of theater (Smith, 2004). This is not to claim that policy makers are acting in bad faith. Rather, because of the distribution (or not) of resources, tragic levels of impoverishment, the ways policies are implemented (or not), and the cleverness of economically and cultural dominant groups in using reforms for their own advantage, the patterns of benefits are not anywhere near the supposedly democratic ends envisioned by some of their well-meaning proponents. (Some reforms as well may simply be the result of cynical manipulation of the public
for electoral advantage; but that’s a topic for another essay.)

UNDERSTANDING CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN EDUCATION

The arguments I made above are related to a particular claim that is important to make. Many of us have spent a good deal of time showing that it is social movements, not educators, who are the real engines of educational transformations (Anyon, 2005; Apple, 2000, 2006, [2009]). And the social movements that are the most powerful now are more than a little conservative. I want to argue in fact that unless we think very tactically about what the Right has been able to accomplish and what the balance of forces now are, all too much of our attempts at putting in place more critically democratic reforms may be less powerful than we would like.

Over the past decade, a good deal of concerted effort has been devoted to analyzing the reasons behind the rightist resurgence—what I have called “conservative modernization”—in education and to try to find spaces for interrupting it (see Apple, 2006; Apple & Buras, 2006). My own aim has not simply been to castigate the Right, although there is a bit of fun in doing so. Rather, I have also sought to illuminate the dangers, and the elements of good sense, not only bad sense, that are found within what is an identifiable and powerful new “hegemonic bloc” (that is, a powerful set of groups that provides overall leadership to and pressure on what the basic goals and policies of a society are). This new rightist alliance is made up of various factions—neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives and some members of the professional and managerial new middle class. These are complicated groups, but let me describe them briefly.

This power bloc combines multiple fractions of capital who are committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educational problems, neo-conservative intellectuals who want a “return” to higher standards and a “common culture,” authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular fractions of the professionally oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement and “management.” While there are clear tensions and conflicts within this alliance, in general its overall aims are in providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family and school (Apple, 1996, 2006).

I have had a number of reasons for focusing on the alliance behind conservative modernization. First, these groups are indeed powerful, as any honest analysis of what is happening in education and the larger society clearly indicates. Second, they are quite talented in connecting to people who might ordinarily disagree with them. For this reason, I have shown in a number of places that people who find certain elements of conservative modernization relevant to their lives are not puppets. They are not dupes who have little understanding of the “real” relations of this society. This smacks of earlier reductive analyses within the critical tradition that were based in ideas of “false consciousness.”

My position is very different. I maintain that the reason that some of the arguments coming from the various factions of this new hegemonic bloc are listened to is because they are connected to aspects of the realities that people experience (Apple, 1996; Apple & Pedroni, 2005). The tense alliance of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious activists and the professional and managerial new middle class only works because there has been a very creative articulation of themes that resonate deeply with the experiences, fears, hopes and dreams of people as they go about their daily lives. The Right has often been more than a little manipulative in its articulation of these themes. It has integrated them within racist nativist discourses, within economically dominant forms of understanding, and within a problematic sense of “tradition.” But, this integration could only occur
if they were organized around people’s understanding of their real material and cultural lives.

The second reason I have stressed the tension between good and bad sense and the ability of dominant groups to connect to people’s real understandings of their lives—aside from my profound respect for Antonio Gramsci’s (1968, 1971) writings about this—has to do with my belief that we have witnessed a major educational accomplishment over the past three decades in many countries. All too often, we assume that educational and cultural struggles are epiphenomenal. The real battles occur in the paid workplace—the “economy.” Not only is this a strikingly reductive sense of what the economy is (its focus on paid, not unpaid, work; its neglect of the fact that, say, cultural institutions such as schools are also places where paid work goes on, etc.) (Apple, 1986), it also ignores what the Right has actually done.

Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the commonsense of society. It has worked in every sphere—the economic, the political and the cultural—to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives. It has established new identities. It has recognized that to win in the state, you must win in civil society. That is, you need to work at the level of people’s daily experiences, not only in government policies. The accomplishment of such a vast educational project has many implications. It shows how important cultural struggles are. And, oddly enough, it gives reason for hope. It forces us to ask a number of significant questions. What can we learn from the Right about how to build movements for social transformation? If the Right can do this, why can’t we?

I do not mean these as rhetorical questions. As I have argued repeatedly in my own work, the Right has shown how powerful the struggle over meaning and identity—and hence, schools, curricula, teaching and evaluation—can be. While we should not want to emulate their often cynical and manipulative processes, the fact that they have had such success in pulling people under their ideological umbrella has much to teach us. Granted there are real differences in money and power between the forces of conservative modernization and those whose lives are being tragically altered by the policies and practices coming from the alliance. But, the Right was not as powerful 30 years ago as it is now. It collectively organized. It created a decentered unity, one where each element sacrificed some of its particular agenda to push forward on those areas that bound them together. Can we not do the same?

I believe that we can, but only if we face up to the realities and dynamics of power in unromantic ways—and think tactically about what can be done now even under conditions that we may not always control. And this means not only critically analyzing the rightist agendas and the effects of their increasingly mistaken and arrogant policies, but engaging in some serious criticism of some elements within the progressive and critical educational communities as well. Thus, as I argue in *Educating the “Right” Way* (Apple, 2006), the romantic, possibilist rhetoric of some of the writers on critical pedagogy is not sufficiently based on a tactical or strategic analysis of the current situation nor is it sufficiently grounded in its understanding of the reconstructions of discourse and movements that are occurring in all too many places. Here I follow Cameron McCarthy (2000), who wisely reminds us, “We must think possibility within constraint; that is the condition of our time.”

We need to remember that cultural and educational struggles are not epiphenomenal. They count, and they count in institutions throughout society. In order for dominant groups to exercise leadership, large numbers of people must be convinced that the maps of reality circulated by those with the most economic, political, and cultural power are indeed wiser than other alternatives. Dominant groups do this by attaching these maps to the elements of good sense that people have and by changing the very meaning of the key concepts and their accompanying structures of feeling that provide the centers of gravity for our hopes, fears, and dreams about this society. The Right has been much more successful in doing this than progressive groups and movements, in part because it has been able to craft—through
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hard and lengthy economic, political, and cultural efforts—a tense but still successful alliance that has shifted the major debates over education and economic and social policy onto its own terrain. And the sometimes mostly rhetorical material of critical pedagogy simply is unable to cope with this. Only when it is linked much more to concrete issues of educational policy and practice—and to the daily lives of educators, students, and community members—can it succeed. This, of course, is why journals such as *Rethinking Schools* and books such as *Democratic Schools* (Apple & Beane, 2007) that connect critical educational theories and approaches to the actual ways in which they can be and are present in real classrooms become so important. Thus, while we should support the principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy in the USA and elsewhere, we also need to act as internal critics when it has forgotten what it is meant to do and has sometimes become simply an academic specialization at universities.

**REFERENCES**


Projects for Further Exploration

1. Find the school report cards (part of the No Child Left Behind Act) for three school districts in your area (one from a rural area, one from a suburban area, and one from an urban area) and compare the data for each district on factors such as the graduation rates, percentage of students going on to college, and the racial composition of the districts.

2. Using an academic database, look for the most recent studies on charter schools and compare the findings from these studies to those presented in the readings by Linda Renzulli and Vincent Roscigno and by Linda Darling-Hammond.

3. Read your local newspaper for articles about education and schools, paying particular attention to political dimensions of the issues being discussed. Can you tell if those articles are coming from conservative or liberal political groups?